

THE JOY DEVICE



JUSTIN RICHARDS

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'NOTHING HAPPENS, NOBODY COMES, NOBODY GOES... IT'S WORSE THAN SAMUEL BECKETT.'

Benny has had enough. Enough of the angst and the heartache. Enough of Jason and the others. She needs a holiday, and so she's heading to the Eastern Rim, a part of the galaxy where there is still a frontier, an adventure to be had. She's packed her trowel. She's off.

Her friends are concerned. Drug barons, war lords, criminal cartels and outlaws have fled to the Rim from authority and order. There's a distinct risk of getting into trouble, not to mention life-threatening peril. It's not so much that Benny might come to harm; she might find she likes it out there.

But Benny finds the Eastern Rim almost suspiciously ordinary: no violence, no action, no excitement. So when she is asked by a shady curio dealer to help him find Dorpfeld's Prism, it seems just another cursed relic to recover before retiring to the bar. In a place this dull, nothing dangerous can possibly happen. Can it?

T H E N E W
A D V E N T U R E S

JUSTIN RICHARDS seems to be making a habit of writing novels when he should really be doing other things. But the other things are always less fun. So what the hell.

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For the little joys in my own life:
Julian and Christian

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A D V E N T U R E S

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Justin Richards

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CHAPTER 1

There are two conflicting schools of thought. Actually, 'conflicting' is something of an understatement. They are about as diametrically opposed as you can get. As I struggled to tread water, catch my breath and recall the details of each possible course of action, I kept my attention firmly on the bandersnatch. I tried to keep my gaze away from the teeth, but this was rather tricky since the animal was almost all teeth, at least from my vantage point.

And herein lies the problem. 'Vantage' suggests some sort of superiority, in terms of height if not intellect and physical prowess. I was somewhat below the level of the huge mouth as it plunged towards me, and, while my physique is something that I take a healthy interest in maintaining at its peak, I must confess that it was beginning to seem rather inadequate given the company.

Which leaves the intellect. And brings me back to the thought that raced through my mind. Of course, once I had realized that this was not the most advantageous of situations, I began to run through the available options. And, as I say, there were two distinct and irreconcilable schools of thought about what to do when faced with a ravening, not to say frumious, bandersnatch.

The first option that is advised is to stand one's ground, resolutely refuse to show any fear, stare down the creature, and then poke a pencil or similar sharp instrument through one of the eyeballs into its brain. Such as it is. My immediate feeling at the moment when it mattered most was that whoever had dreamt up this advice was either walking around oblivious to the pencil or similar sharp object sticking out of the front of their face, or was dead. Or both. In fact, I won't conceal the fact that I was actively and urgently

considering the alternative advice that is offered for such situations.

That is: swim like crazy for the bank, then run like hell. And pray (though I think that bit's optional and dependent on your own particular beliefs and faith system). On the whole, especially given that my artist's materials were (a) on the further bank and (b) pastels, I was ready to plump for Option Two.

But then I remembered the Duchess's brooch.

Oh please!

It was, as you will recall, pinned through the lapel of my jacket. It had never occurred to me that it had any value as a drawing implement, but right now its similarity to a pencil and ability to function as a sharp object was suddenly and perfectly apparent.

Yawn!

Fumbling slightly with the catch as I kept my eyes fixed firmly on the bandersnatch roaring above me, I managed to extract the heavy brooch from my jacket. Careful not to prick myself with the sharp end of the pin, I angled it towards

Ho hum... blah-blah-blah...

a ferocious snarl of anger as it plunged down towards
et cetera, et cetera, blah-de-blah-de-blah...

death throes of the terrible creature. I had endeavoured to keep a tight hold on the brooch, but alas, in the confusion and the struggle, I was unable to maintain my grip. The brooch was still deep in the animal's eye as it crashed into the water, sending up a colossal plume and drenching me anew. The makeshift weapon, the thing that had without doubt saved my life, was ripped from my grasp. On cold, damp evenings beside the deep waters of the Spirax, I can still feel the ache in the muscles in my shoulder, torn and damaged as I tried desperately to hold on, to extract the brooch from the creature's brain. But without success.

And, as I waded ashore and pulled myself up the bank, pausing only to acknowledge the scattered applause and congratulation from the rest of the expeditionary team, I found I was shaking with fear.

'You're cold, Dent,' Hampbell said as he offered me his coat. I pushed it roughly aside, ashamed of myself. I, Dent Harper, who had just faced and killed a bandersnatch no less, was shivering with fear. Fear at the thought of having to explain - somehow - to the Duchess of Nimfette that I had lost the brooch she had given me as a token of her

Yes, yes... Get on with it...

As we sailed back up the Rumpopo, the sun was low in the sky. I lay back in the boat and listened to the warbling of a wallaloon close by. The jungle was tinged orange with the setting sun, and the light glistened and shimmered on the rippling water as the oars dipped in and out in a lazy metronome of languid progress.

Huh, travelogue. Boring, boring, boring...

Benny sighed and put the book down. She spent a moment massaging her temples before reaching for the glass of wine on the table beside the abandoned book. Behind the bottle of wine, the half-empty bottle of wine, was a pile of notebooks. There were times when Benny would have considered the bottle half full. This was not one of them.

There were times when she would have thought nothing of lifting one of the notebooks, of flicking through it, of reading the odd passage. Of reliving her memories and experiences. But now she sipped the wine, not really tasting it, and stared at her diaries. There it was - the stack of books that detailed her life. Or purported to. She was well aware that it was a second-hand description. Sometimes third- or fourth-hand, depending on how she had been feeling when she wrote.

There had been times when she could have smiled wryly as she peeled back the layers of memory and recalled what had actually happened. But in too many cases the closest she could get now was peeling away the yellow sticky notes on which her reinterpretations and amendments were scrawled, and to the initial version beneath. The version she had rewritten and hidden from herself.

But now that so many of her actual memories were gone, had been wiped away by the organic programming that had

invaded her mind, she was loath to relive them. It was easier, simpler, safer to read Dent Harper's lurid accounts of adventures out on the Rim. Easier to create new, vicarious memories than try to dredge up the old ones, or admit that they were gone forever. So much of her life now existed only as handwritten accounts in faded ink on tattered paper in frayed notebooks. Unread, perhaps never to be read. Perhaps unreadable. She might as well be the ersatz version of herself that had been given life in the largely fictional and wholly melodramatic *Adventures of the New Frontier*.

It was like being dead.

For several months Benny had actually been dying. The technology-bred illness that had taken her memories had given her back her life. Now her whole life stretched once more ahead of her. Benny might live for decades yet. Or years. Or perhaps only a month. She did not know. But she was free of the knowledge of inevitability, free of worrying about it.

It was her past, not her future, that was upsetting her now. Now that the future was as assured as the future ever could be, Benny was worried about the memories that were gone. The real reason that she hesitated to open her diaries was not that she might faintly recall events they recounted, or even that she might have no stirring of recollection at all.

It was that she would discover how much she had forgotten, how much had been taken from her.

And she wasn't sure she was ready for that yet. She had lain awake at night, thinking about how it would be. She had cried soundless tears from her mind's eyes as they read through page after page of her own handwriting, telling of exploits that could have happened to other people. Emotions she might never have felt, friends she might as well never have met, or lost. Things she could, and in some cases should, never have done.

'I'll burn my books,' her dream self had said. But her waking self was never quite able to muster the same self-assurance or confidence. She might need them. Might...

She told herself that it was liberating to be free of the baggage. It was a relief not to have to worry about so much of her history. It was a blessing to have a ready excuse for any past indiscretion or misdemeanour. It was terrifying.

The problem was not that her past was a blank, a clean slate. If she had to make a guess, she reckoned she could actually remember most of it. But the problem was not knowing what she didn't know. While she was busy, while the present occupied her, she was fine. It was at the end of the day, when she was tired, when she was alone, that the depression was worst. It was then that she told herself that people forgot things anyway, and she was probably no worse off than many people. And it was then that she least believed it.

She was still staring at her diaries. Why not read them? Just once, read them through. It wasn't all there, of course, but a lot of it was. Just read it and be done with it. The memories would never be memories again, but she would at least know what was missing. Something of what was missing. And when people said, 'Do you remember when...?' or 'There was the time...' she could smile, and pretend. Or perhaps the memories would come back, triggered, released somehow by the catharsis of reading her own accounts of... of whatever.

Or perhaps they would not.

She set down her wine, and reached for the topmost notebook. The cover was stained and scorched, the pages discoloured. She rested the book on the polished wooden surface of the desk. Gently, carefully, she ran her hand over the cover, trying to work out whether she remembered how the book felt. Still she did not open it.

Instead, with her palm resting on the top of the diary, keeping it closed, she shut her eyes. What would be inside the first volume? The first volume in the pile rather than necessarily her first diary. How many had she lost over the years? How much would not even be in the books?

She opened her eyes again, and found she was looking at herself. The desk was against a wall, and there was a mirror

above the desk. Her eyes were tired as they blinked back at her. Behind her reflected self, Benny could see the red silk that lined the walls, the heavy-framed portraits that stared back at the mirror. And she could see through the huge bay window that filled one wall of her lounge.

Outside, the sand was rippling gently, almost like water, in the slight breeze. The surface of the small planet seemed to be shifting in a hazy approximation of life. It was blurred, indistinct, difficult to focus on. The effect was exacerbated by the imperfections so carefully worked into the silvering of the mirror and the glass of the window.

For several moments Benny looked out across the surface of Braxiatel's planet. She could see the Mansionhouse as it stretched away across the sand. One day, she knew from the plans, there would be formal, landscaped gardens out there. A long lawn. Avenues of trees and fountains and statues. Like the real Versailles had been. Maybe that was why the place seemed so familiar. Maybe that was why she had snatches of *deja vu* when she entered the Hall of Mirrors, or the skeletal structure that would become the Archaeology section of the Braxiatel Collection.

Or maybe, in the future, when the great project was finally complete, when the workmen had moved on and the endless day-to-day noise was ended... Her hand was still resting on the cover of the book as she stared into the reflection of the world she saw through the window. A reversed distortion of an imperfect view. Then she opened the book.

The first page was blank apart from her handwritten name: Professor Bernice Summerfield. And the date she had started this diary. A date far in the future.

She turned the page, and there was a knock at the door.

'Dinner's ready. I thought you'd want to know.'

She looked up. Jason was standing in the doorway. He was smiling broadly, his head slightly to one side as he leant against the door frame.

She looked back at the book. The page was in mid-turn, frozen at the point where she could see the writing on the next page, but could not read it.

'I hope I'm not interrupting.'

'No,' Benny said. She closed the book and replaced it on the pile. 'No, not at all.'

The view through each of the seventeen large arched windows was almost identical. They gave out on to rolling sands, and behind that a huge planet with magnificent brightly coloured rings hung low over the horizon. The spectacular view was reflected in each of the seventeen mirrors that filled the arches, which themselves mirrored the windows.

The ceiling was covered with richly coloured oil paintings in the Earth Classical style to match the rest of the architecture. The polished wood of the floor reflected the clear bright light from the twenty heavy crystal chandeliers that hung low from the vaulted ceiling. Stretching up as if to meet the chandeliers were a dozen women and a dozen children, fashioned from bronze and holding torches aloft. The ends of the torches became a tray of candles, the flames flickering and reflected in the windows, the mirrors, the chandeliers and the polished forms of the lamp bearers themselves.

The arches of the mirrored alcoves and the windows were ornamented with a round symbol, a disc filled with swirling embossed lines. Benny knew that in the original Hall of Mirrors at Versailles this had been the sun-and-lion-skin emblem of Louis XIV. She smiled at the deviation as she entered the vast, impressive room.

As ever it was the differences she found amusing and intriguing more than the similarities. The view from the windows, the changed emblem, the statues in the four marble niches towards the middle of the room. And the long trestle table that looked lost in the middle of the floor.

She let Jason take her arm, almost without thinking about it. He led her to the makeshift dining table, and pulled her chair out for her. Smiling a thank-you, Benny sat down. She reached for her napkin, still smiling as she looked round at the others. At her friends.

Jason was sitting beside her. It had been with the same mixture of relief, happiness and annoyance that had tinged their marriage that she had realized she could remember everything about him and about their relationship. In fact, most of her recent memories, so far as she could tell with the help of her friends, had survived intact. She knew them all so well.

Beside Jason was Chris Cwej. He was slightly shorter than Jason, slightly plumper too. His dark hair was slicked back, which made it even more apparent that it was receding. Only his eyes seemed still to belong to the tall, fair-haired man he had used to be. Benny wondered whether he found it easier to cope with his change of body than she found coming to terms with her change of mind.

The other side of her was Clarence. She didn't believe he actually needed to eat, but he seemed happy to do so if only for social reasons. He was a biomachine created from the remains of what had once been an immensely powerful, sentient ship. In his current form, he was an angel. Somehow, in this room, that seemed entirely appropriate and in keeping. He looked more at home than any of them. Except perhaps Braxiatel.

Irving Braxiatel sat at the head of the table. He was tall and thin, dressed immaculately as he usually was in a light-grey suit. His hair was short and dark and his features slightly angular. His eyes were alive with an intensity that was exaggerated by the way they flicked to and fro across the table as he looked from one person to another. Benny knew his brain was assembling information, making plans, examining options with the same rapidity as Clarence's systems were, though with very different motives and techniques.

'I'm afraid', Braxiatel said when Benny and Jason had taken their seats, 'that, since I've still not got round to employing any kitchen or serving staff, you'll have to help yourselves.' He motioned for them to remove the lids from the dishes that were arranged along the table.

She waited until the pudding before she told them. It wasn't so much summoning up the courage, she told herself, as choosing the right moment. She wanted them happy enough and relaxed enough and with enough wine inside them that they would listen and take in what she wanted to say. But not so much that they would not understand, or would forget it afterwards.

Jason reached over with a wine bottle, tipping it towards Benny's glass. She put her hand over the top of the glass to show she didn't want any. The bottle froze. Jason stared.

After a moment, there was silence.

Braxiatel frowned. 'Are you all right, Benny?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Well, no but yes. If you understand.'

Braxiatel dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. 'It's difficult, I'm sure,' he said gently. 'Don't try to force things. Some memories may come back of their own accord, as it were. Lots won't, though.' He dropped the napkin down on the table, opening his hands as if in an apology.

'I know,' Benny said. She felt Jason take her hand and squeeze it. She shook it free without looking at him. 'It's not that,' she said quietly. 'There's something I want you all to know. I think now's as good a time as any.'

She could almost feel them all looking at her as she stared down at the empty plate in front of her. Silence.

She looked up again, fixing each of her friends in turn with a short but meaningful stare. She finished with Jason, locking her eyes on to his. 'I'm going away,' she said. 'I need a break.'

Jason's eyes did not move, but his mouth dropped open. 'Away?' he said. 'You mean, *away* away? From here, and us?'

'You're going away?' Clarence said before she could answer Jason.

'Yes,' she said. It sounded short, impatient. She hadn't meant it to.

'You need a break?' Cwej asked.

'I need a break,' she repeated. 'That's what I said.' She looked round them all again. 'What is this, parrot class?'

‘But we’re your friends.’ Jason sounded weak, almost pathetic as he said it.

She took his hand and squeezed it. He did not try to pull it away. ‘I know,’ Benny told him. ‘Really I do. But I need a break. I don’t know who I am any more, not really. I need to go away for a bit, that’s all. Rediscover myself if you like. Think things through. Find myself.’

‘But are you sure you’re up to it?’ Clarence asked. ‘You’ve been ill.’

Benny laughed, a dry sarcastic sound that echoed off the mirrors. ‘I had noticed,’ she said. ‘I’ve been dying. And that’s an effort, believe me. It drains you, leaves you cold and numb. Even without the memory-loss thing.’

There was a pause. There were meaningful exchanged glances and worried looks. Benny waited in silence for the next move.

‘Well,’ said Jason at last, his voice trembling with forced enthusiasm. ‘That’s great. So... where are we going, then?’

‘Not *we*. Me. Alone. I need time and space.’

Jason stared. He sighed. ‘I don’t think you’re ready yet,’ he said. ‘I don’t think you’re up to it.’

‘Oh, don’t you?’ she snapped back. ‘And what gives you special insight into what I do and don’t need or what I am or am not ready for or up to?’ She realized she was still holding his hand and pulled away quickly. ‘Tell me that, Jason Kane,’ she said loudly to cover the move and her embarrassment.

‘Where are you going?’ Cwej asked.

‘And for how long?’ Clarence added.

‘I don’t know how long,’ she said. ‘But I thought I’d head out to the Eastern Rim. Live on the edge.’ She smiled at the joke. But nobody returned her smile. ‘Danger, excitement, the frontier spirit, that sort of thing,’ she said. ‘Bit like the old days. I think. Anyway, it’ll be a change, and the change will do me good. Besides,’ she lied, ‘I’m looking forward to it. Lots.’

She looked round again. They were all quiet now. All avoiding her gaze, staring down at the table, or up at the

ceiling, or just looking away. All except Braxiatel, who caught her eye as he nodded slowly. 'You're very quiet,' she told him.

He stopped nodding and raised an eyebrow. 'Well, you've obviously made up your mind,' he said. 'If you're sure this is what you want to do, then we must respect your decision. We're your friends, after all. We're here to support you in whatever way we can, in whatever way you think best. That's what friends are for.' There was a hint of a smile on his face as he said it. He sighed. 'Still, if your mind's made up...'

But she wasn't fooled for a moment. 'Oh yes,' Benny snapped back. 'Very clever. Appealing to my guilty conscience now, are you? Shaming me into changing my mind, is that it? Well it won't work.'

'Of course not,' he murmured.

'I've already decided. I've packed my rucksack, and I've booked a flight from Cyrano Major. I'm off.' She nodded to punctuate the point, and felt the effects of the wine as she moved her head. 'First thing tomorrow,' she said as she stood up. She threw her napkin down like a gauntlet, ignoring the fact that it landed in a bowl of custard. 'Just as soon as I've sobered up.'

They all flinched as the door slammed shut behind Benny. Braxiatel was standing, politely, out of habit. Cwej was leaning back in his chair, frowning. Clarence was staring at the door with his mouth open. Jason was wiping the splashes of custard from his face.

Braxiatel sat down. Jason dabbed at his shirt with a clean bit of napkin. Nobody said anything for a while.

'Port,' Braxiatel said eventually. 'Port in the Hall of Battles.'

'How appropriate,' Cwej muttered.

'Good idea,' Jason said. 'I could do with a drink. Another drink.'

'She'll change her mind,' Clarence said. 'In the morning, when she's thought it over.'

Nobody spoke. Nobody even looked at him.

'Won't she?' he said to the figure closest to him. But it was just his reflection.

The port was excellent, they all agreed. They had several glasses, even Clarence. Eventually Jason voiced the concerns they all shared.

‘What if she likes it out there?’ he said. ‘What if she doesn’t want to come back?’

‘Is that likely?’ Clarence asked.

‘She talked about the frontier spirit,’ Cwej said. ‘She talked about danger and excitement. It’s in her blood. She’s a *doing* rather than a *being* person.’

Braxiatel nodded. ‘Her memory losses have upset her a lot. More than we can guess, probably. But she is fundamentally not retrospective any more than she is introspective. She’ll want to be out there, making new memories to replace the ones she has lost.’

‘And to take her mind off things,’ Jason said. ‘She wants to spend some time working out what she wants to be when she grows up.’

‘Don’t we all?’ Cwej said. ‘And fat and balding wasn’t on my list, I have to say.’

‘She sees the frontier spirit as a way of getting away from the humdrum affair that everyday life has become round here.’ Braxiatel refilled his glass from the decanter. ‘She thinks that she’s heading off into uncharted territory, the lands where men are real men, and archaeologists are real archaeologists with trowels and romantic dreams.’

‘Oh God,’ murmured Jason.

‘But where, also,’ Braxiatel said, ‘the excitement is without real danger, and the thrills are without pain or responsibility.’

‘And I assume it’s not really like that,’ Clarence said.

‘The frontier spirit’, Jason told him, ‘is another phrase for real danger, for real risk of ending up dead in a dusty gutter.’

‘If the drug gangs don’t get you,’ Cwej offered, ‘then a cartel might lop your head off if you stick your neck out.’

‘Or one of the outlaws who’s fled to the Rim to escape whatever brutal justice waits for him at home might decide he likes the look of you,’ Jason added.

‘Danger, excitement, risk, the odds and everything else against her. The cradle of civilization, picaresque lands rife with cut-throats, villains, street scum who’ll murder you for the price of a beer.’ Braxiatel nodded grimly. ‘That’s about the size of it.’

Clarence’s expression was grave. ‘You’re afraid she’ll come to some harm,’ he said. ‘You’re worried about her.’

For a long time they all just stared at him.

‘I think you’re missing the point here,’ Braxiatel said gently. ‘We’re not worried that Benny will come to any harm as such. She’s quite capable of looking after herself.’

‘Then, what?’

‘We’re worried’, Jason said, ‘that she’ll like it out there.’

Clarence considered this. ‘We have to stop her going,’ he said.

‘But how?’ Cwej asked. ‘We all know Benny. Once she’s made her mind up...’ His voice tailed off.

‘Someone will have to talk to her,’ Clarence declared. ‘Someone will have to persuade her to stay. Tell her that it isn’t a good idea.’

Jason snorted. ‘You saw how she was just now at dinner. It’ll be a brave man who tries to talk her out of it now.’ He laughed. ‘You won’t catch me -’ But then he saw how they were looking at him. How they were all looking at him. He stopped laughing. ‘Now wait a minute...’

‘According to God’s simulations, as well as our own experience and intuition of course,’ Braxiatel said slowly, ‘there’s only one person who has a reasonable chance of talking Benny into or out of anything.’

‘Reasonable?’ Jason exploded. ‘Reasonable? Anybody less reasonable when she’s in this sort of mood is difficult to imagine.’

‘Oh, come on,’ Cwej said. ‘It can’t be that difficult.’

‘I have trouble imagining them,’ Jason told him.

‘I meant, to talk to her about it.’

‘Fine. You do it, then.’

‘That is, for someone who enjoys your special relationship with Benny,’ Cwej finished.

‘Let’s just hope she remembers it,’ Braxiatel said as he topped up Jason’s glass. ‘Here’s to your success.’ He raised his own glass and sipped appreciatively at the deep-red liquid within it.

Jason drained his glass in a single gulp. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘OK, fine. You want me to get you out of this, then fine. That’s what I say.’ He handed his glass to Braxiatel and stared at him. ‘I’ll do it,’ he said, thrusting out his chest and his chin. ‘Fine. It’s down to me, is it? Right, then. Fine. Just fine. And dandy.’

There seemed to be a lighter atmosphere in the room now. Except round Jason. But nobody spoke. They just smiled.

‘I didn’t give you that glass to hold on to,’ Jason snapped at last. ‘Fill it up and give it back, will you?’

‘I thought you were going to talk to Benny,’ Clarence said as Jason snatched back the glass.

Port splashed viscously on to his shoes. Jason ignored it. He ignored the trickle of sticky liquid on his hand and knuckles too. ‘I am,’ he said. ‘Really, I am.’ He drained the glass once more, then held it out to Braxiatel. ‘Again,’ he said, slightly indistinctly. ‘Oh yes, I’m going to speak to her,’ he went on, wagging the glass dangerously as Braxiatel refilled it again. ‘Absolutely, I am.’ He nodded, his face set in a determined expression. ‘First thing in the morning.’

‘Fine,’ said Cwej.

CHAPTER 2

I wrote earlier, you will recall, of my great ambition while here on this darkest of planets. I shall now inform you of how I came to attain that goal, and in a quite extraordinary manner.

As I said that I would, I went on the afternoon of the seventh to see the Virabilan Proconsul, knowing full well that he was in all probability the last person to whom I could apply in this matter. After a while, inevitably it seems looking back now, our conversation turned to the native rituals of the area. I mentioned as casually as I deemed to be natural that I should not at all be displeased to experience (albeit from afar) one of these strange nocturnal ceremonies. The Proconsul's reply surprised even me by its force, although his wife - whom I have of course described before in no little detail - smiled surreptitiously. She was obviously well used to outbursts of a similar vigour.

'On no account,' cried the Proconsul, bringing his fist down far from delicately among the Regal Worcester and double damask. 'On no account will I condone these evil - and I use the word with all its nuances - these evil, not to say devilish, rituals. They are to be stamped out at the earliest possible convenience.' He said many other things as well, but they seemed to consist mainly of stutters and loud exhalations not at all befitting his high office. Just at this moment a tray of sweetmeats arrived, and our conversation widened to encompass the difficulties involved in shipping out high-quality biscuits from Virabilis.

One interesting point that did arise from the ensuing discussion was that there is in the town a certain Frenkman who claims to be able to supply anything to those with sufficient funds at their disposal - indeed it is from him that most of the Proconsul's very finest biscuits arrive. A thought

regarding this gentleman occurred to me, my interest in the native rituals heightened if anything from its none too mean original level by the Proconsul's unexpected vehemence, and I determined to see this Monseigneur Pacquet, as he is named.

To pare a tale of length to the minimum, Pacquet was most helpful. In return for a large amount of the local currency, on the night of the twelfth I found myself, accompanied by this diminutive, moustachioed gentleman, on the edge of a grove not very far from the town. We arrived just as the ritual was about to commence, and watched from our clandestine position as the torches were extinguished all around the grove, leaving the locale in total, moonless black.

Pacquet had warned me what was to be the form of the dance, and we had arranged a system of whistles so that I could find my way back to our cover before the torches were rekindled. However, despite his description, I was hardly prepared for what was to follow. The earliest part of the dance, if dance it can be called, involved merely milling around, bumping into people, apologizing in silence (silence but for the beat of the drums, that is) by a shaking of hands, and walking on.

Next, the shaking of hands became something akin to a perusal of the same, each tickling the fleshy part of the other's palm for several minutes, although it seemed almost no time at all. By the third stage of the rites, which involved the stroking of the arms, shoulder and head of whomsoever strayed into one's path, I was beginning to get caught up in the collective excitement of the crowd - most of which, I should add, was female.

But it was the final movement that I found the most interesting. It involved the rubbing together of backs between pairs of people. Pacquet had warned me of the dangers of accidentally rubbing backs with the witch doctor, one of the spear-bearing tribesmen, or for that matter a spiny mutabo tree, and I went to great trouble to ensure that the back that I found did indeed belong to a member of the fair sex.

I could tell that it did so by the height of the owner - for all of the tribesmen are at least as tall as I; and, despite the fact

that it seemed rather more encumbered by clothing than any other I had yet met in the blackness, I rubbed my own back against it with a vigour returned in at least equal proportion.

As that all too short final moment of the native ritual came to a close, I (forgetting myself in the close exchange of bodily warmth) murmured quietly, 'God bless the Throcket of Magnamora', for his cattle must have been almost as grateful for the posts he provided for them to rub their backs upon on the open plains of Magnamora Minor.

My words, overheard by my spinal collaborator, provoked a small gasp from her, as if she had been suddenly surprised indulging in some illicit pleasure. What struck me as odd was that it was a gasp I recognized, and which I remembered for most of the silent journey back to town with my Frenkophile philanthropist.

So it was, my dear reader, that I at last came to rub backs with the Virabilan Proconsul's wife.

Benny smiled and put the book down. She had slept badly after her outburst at dinner the previous evening, but a swift chapter of Harper's *Adventures on the Rim* had brightened her spirits. She was, she had almost convinced herself now, looking forward to it. A bit.

Though, of course, she had no real intention of going.

She had made a half-hearted attempt to pack as she waited for someone - anyone, really - to arrive and suggest breakfast. Then they would all say how they'd miss her, and couldn't she reconsider, please?

And Benny would tell them that, no, her mind was made up. And then later in the morning she would receive the confirmation of her travel arrangements as promised by Domistos Tours and have the perfect excuse to cry off and make a great show of being disappointed that her one simple, outrageous request had not been fulfilled by the tour company.

By the time Benny had got bored with waiting she was extremely hungry and had thoroughly packed her rucksack

for the third time. She hoisted it on to her shoulder and headed off towards breakfast.

Benny stopped at the top of the main staircase and looked down. The staircase itself was as impressive as the other parts of the building that were actually finished. It was constructed out of different-coloured marble. Slabs, steps and balustrades were all of marble. Red and white stone, veined through with white, black and blue, led down to the hallway below. With painted panels and false-perspective landscapes adorning the walls, it was an awe-inspiring sight.

But this was not why Benny paused as she looked down into the hallway. She could see Jason pacing nervously up and down below. As she watched he climbed the first few steps of the staircase, then turned and went back down to the hall to resume his pacing. He was waiting for someone, and Benny knew exactly who. And why.

‘Why does he have to be so obvious about everything?’ she murmured to herself. Then she adjusted her rucksack on her back, adopted a thoughtful expression, and started down the stairs. Just in case he was not paying attention, she started whistling.

Jason was apparently on his way up the stairs when Benny looked up. They passed on the half-landing.

‘Oh, hi, Benny,’ he said lightly. ‘Good morning. Sleep well?’

She gave this some consideration. ‘Yes, thanks.’ Then she carried on down the stairs.

‘Oh, er, wait a minute, will you?’ Jason turned and followed close behind her.

By walking at an angle she managed to keep him behind her, so he could not see her face and she appeared not to be paying attention. ‘Mmm?’ she said.

‘So, er, you’re off, then?’

She paused at the bottom of the stairs. Just long enough for him to think she was waiting for him. Then she set off towards the dining room. ‘Yes. Just waiting for the final confirmation of arrangements. Should be here by now.’ ‘Oh. Right.’ He managed to catch up and they kept step in silence for a while down the hallway.

‘Jason?’ Benny said after a while, stopping suddenly.

‘Yes?’

‘Was there something you wanted?’

‘No,’ he said quickly. She could tell from his face he had meant to say ‘yes’. ‘No,’ he said again, as if to be sure.

Benny nodded slowly. ‘Good,’ she said.

They both stood in silence, looking at each other.

‘Jason, listen -’ Benny started, just as Jason said, ‘Benny, I-’

They both stopped.

‘After you,’ Jason said.

‘No, no. You go first.’

‘All right.’ He took a deep breath.

‘You would too, wouldn’t you?’ Benny snapped before he could exhale. ‘You’d go ahead and barge in with whatever half-arsed comment or observation you have before I can get a word in edgeways. Typical. Just typical. Thank you so much, Jason bloody Kane.’

He stared at her, mouth frozen open, as if he were about to speak.

‘Well, what is it?’ Benny demanded.

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘You go first.’

‘Oh don’t start that again. I don’t have to be asked for an opinion, you know.’ She started off down the hallway again. ‘I can talk when I want, thank you. I’m not some shrinking-violet wallflower woman who daren’t venture an opinion, you know.’

‘Yes, Benny,’ Jason said quietly.

She turned immediately. ‘You mean yes, you agree, or yes, I am?’ She frowned at him hard. ‘Think before you answer that.’

‘Am I allowed to answer that?’

‘What are you implying?’ She stood with hands on hips and stared at him, ignoring the way her rucksack was sliding across her shoulder.

‘Nothing, Benny. It’s just that -’

‘That I never let you say anything? Is that it?’

‘Well -’

‘Well, that’s rubbish, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Benny. It’s rubbish.’

He was biting his lip in that annoying way that meant he didn’t mean what he said. Benny took a deep breath and ignored it. ‘Right, then,’ she said with great patience, using most of her reserves of goodwill for the morning. ‘What did you want to say?’

He said nothing. He was still biting his lip, considering.

She gave him three seconds. More than ample, she reckoned. He obviously needed help with this one. So she said, ‘Because if you think you can talk me out of going to the Rim you can forget it.’

‘Oh. OK, then.’

‘No,’ Benny said, ‘my mind’s made up. I told you -’ She paused to reassess his comment. ‘What?’

‘OK,’ Jason said again. ‘I won’t try to talk you out of it. Your mind’s made up.’

‘Good,’ Benny said loudly. ‘Great. That’s sorted, then. I’m off.’ She waited for him to speak. He didn’t. ‘Today,’ she said emphatically. ‘Soon, in fact.’

Still Jason said nothing.

‘And I’m looking forward to it. So don’t try to persuade me to stay.’

‘But Benny,’ Jason said surprisingly gently and quietly, ‘don’t you think

So quietly she barely heard him. ‘And you know what I’m looking forward to most? Getting away from you. That’s what. Peace and quiet without you forever interrupting and wittering on. Never listening to a word -’

She paused. Hang on, he had just said -

But, before she could remember exactly what he had been saying, Jason was talking again, making the most of the gap she had left in the air.

‘And I’m glad you’re going,’ he said loudly. ‘I hope you have a really good time out there, you know that? Just great. That’s what I hope. And I’m looking forward to it too.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes, I’m really looking forward to a bit of time to myself here. A bit of time without the endless arguing over nothing. Without forever having to pretend I disagree because it’s expected. Without having to take the other side just to keep the banter going and have something to quarrel about.’

She was shocked. So shocked she knew she hadn’t managed to hide it. Her expression must be obvious. ‘You really mean that?’ she said.

Jason sighed. When he answered his voice was quieter, more reasonable. ‘Benny ..

‘Because if you do, then it just confirms to me that I’m making the right choice here.’

‘Good. I’m glad I’ve helped,’ he snapped back. ‘You bugger off to the Rim and see if I care.’

‘Right,’ she said. ‘I will.’ She marched off to breakfast, not looking to see if Jason was following. ‘God I need a cup of coffee.’

It seemed that everyone else had already breakfasted. The bacon was cold, the scrambled eggs congealing and the coffee tepid. It did nothing to mitigate Benny’s dark mood. By the time the sound of the workmen hammering and cutting stone in a nearby room struck up she had reached the conclusion that perhaps she would go to the Rim after all. That would show them.

She sat alone and drank another cup of the grainy cold coffee.

‘Good morning.’ Braxiatel seemed unusually cheerful as he handed Benny a plain white envelope. ‘This came for you. Special courier from Telestris. I suppose they don’t trust the satellites yet.’ He smiled. ‘Can’t say I blame them.’

‘Thanks.’ She took it without further comment.

Braxiatel waited. But she did not open the envelope. She set it down beside her plate.

‘Would you like some fresh coffee?’ he asked after a few moments.

‘No, this is fine.’

He nodded. ‘I’ll get you some.’

When she was alone again, Benny allowed herself a slight smile. Then she opened the envelope. The final arrangements, complete no doubt with an apology and an excuse to bottle out. She had made her point. Now she could save her face as well.

But then she read the letter. And then she read it again.

Jason was waiting for Braxiatel in the small kitchen area nearby. There was coffee brewing, the strong aroma permeating the atmosphere. Jason did not seem to be enjoying the smell. Cwej and Clarence were standing nearby. Nobody said anything.

Braxiatel checked the coffee. 'So, how did it go?' he asked.

Jason nodded. 'It went... well,' he said. 'Considering.'

The relief was evident on both Clarence's and Cwej's faces. 'You talked her out of it?' Clarence asked.

'Well done,' Cwej said. 'Really, well done.'

But Jason did not look like he was in the mood for congratulation.

'What did you mean, "considering"?' Braxiatel asked.

'I meant I'm still alive.'

'And Benny?'

'She's still alive too.' Jason gulped. 'And she's still going.'

There was silence for a while. 'But what about all those things you were going to say?' Clarence asked. 'You know, about how we love her and need her and she mustn't go.'

'Didn't you explain things?' Cwej asked. 'Didn't you point out what she might be getting herself into?'

'Well...' Jason shuffled his feet. 'Sort of...'

Braxiatel sighed. 'All right,' he said, 'what did you say to her?'

'Edited highlights will do,' Cwej said.

Jason looked at them. 'I told her...'

'Yes?' They all leant forward expectantly.

'I told her to bugger off and see if we care.' Jason was looking at his shuffling feet now. 'I mean,' he went on quickly, 'I don't care. I really don't. If she wants to go off and have a good time, make a fool of herself without us, then that's... fine.'

The only sound was Braxiatel's footsteps as he took the coffee to the dining room.

He passed her in the hallway. Benny was in a hurry. She barely changed course to avoid the hot coffee pot.

'Oh, thanks,' she said quickly. 'But no, thanks. No time. Got to dash. That was my itinerary. Got to repack everything. They're sending a shuttle. I'll give you a shout when I'm off. Bye for now.'

Then she was gone.

Braxiatel watched the space that Benny had recently been occupying. He considered for a moment, then continued through to the dining room with the coffee. Once there, he poured himself a cup and sat down where Benny had been. In front of him on the table was the envelope he had recently handed her. Ignoring the sounds of the workmen in the next room, he picked it up.

Beneath the envelope was a sheet of folded paper. He opened it and read quickly through the itinerary. Shuttle flights, connections. Hotel booking on one of the main planets on the Rim. He committed it all to memory as fast as he read through it.

Right at the bottom, beneath the printed details, was scrawled a brief note. It ended with an exclamation mark. As he finished reading, Braxiatel sounded out the exclamation mark. Then he looked round quickly to check nobody had heard.

He sat for a few minutes, finishing his coffee and staring at the paper. Then he replaced it under the envelope and set off back to the kitchen area.

Cwej, Clarence and Jason were still there. Cwej was staring at Jason. Jason was looking at the floor. Clarence had his eyes shut. Like kids waiting for the headmaster to mete out suitable punishment for their misdemeanours.

'Right, you three,' Braxiatel said sharply. 'My study, now.'

The walls of Braxiatel's large study were inlaid marble. In the centre of the room stood a mahogany writing desk. A simple

office chair was behind it. Along each wall were alcoves. In several stood statues of Levithian Graffs in full ceremonial armour. Others were empty, the walls blank, awaiting paintings of parts of the grounds that had yet to be created. Once painted, these would be to make up for the lack of windows. The room was deep within the Mansionhouse - not overlooked, and completely shielded.

Against one wall was a leather sofa. It was a big sofa, and Cwej, Clarence and Jason all fitted into it with room to spare.

'I've just read Benny's itinerary,' Braxiatel said as he sat himself in the office chair. He leant forward, resting his elbows on the top of the desk. 'She's off to Virabilis.'

'For how long?' Cwej asked.

'It's an open-ended deal. But she's staying in the Xcelsior. I doubt she can afford that for long.'

'She's had this planned for a while,' Jason said. 'There's no way we could have talked her out of it.'

'I thought you didn't care,' Clarence said.

'I don't.'

'When's she leave?' Cwej asked.

'In about half an hour. They're sending a shuttle.'

'Good luck to her,' Jason muttered. 'I hope she has fun.'

'I'm afraid she may,' Braxiatel said. 'There was a handwritten note at the bottom of the itinerary. It said that the tour company were sure that Benny would be pleased to know that they'd secured the services of the local guide she asked for.'

Jason laughed. 'Doesn't sound like Benny. Needing a local guide?' He shook his head. 'Not that I care,' he said wistfully, 'but if she's getting a guided tour I reckon she'll be bored and back here in a week.'

'It does sound out of character,' Cwej admitted.

Braxiatel sighed. 'Except that the local guide she asked for was a specific person,' he said.

'Anyone we know?' Clarence asked.

'Only by repute. It's Dent Harper.'

* * *

Once in her room, Benny tipped out the contents of her rucksack on to the bed. Then she sorted through and put most of the things back in the rucksack.

Dent Harper.

She could hardly believe it. She had actually managed to get Dent Harper as her guide. This was going to be terrific. Amazing. The adventure holiday of a lifetime.

She rummaged through her wardrobe looking for a decent frock. After all, there would be dinner between the adventures and the visits to Places of Interest. There would be drinks at the bar after dinner. And after that... Well, after that she could ask Dent about his own brushes with death and discoveries of the ancient.

She paused. What would Harper be expecting? Would she be as he thought she would? Had she better read through her diaries, just in case, or should she rely on just being herself whoever that might be?

She picked up the pile of notebooks from the desk, hefting them as she felt the weight of accumulated experience. 'Sod it,' she said, and put them back on the desk.

She was humming happily as she left her room, her rucksack slung over one shoulder. At every window she passed she glanced out to see if the shuttle had arrived yet.

I take it you mean *the* Dent Harper,' Cwej was saying. 'Young, rich, strong, handsome...' There was a hint of regret in his voice.

'I don't care,' Jason insisted yet again. 'I really don't. I mean, what about those awful travelogue books of his? What's that one? *Journeys on a Wilderdonkey* - something.' He shook his head in apparent sadness. 'What a tosser. Can't even write properly.' He broke off into a collection of sighs and tut-tuts. 'I ask you,' he said after a while, 'have you actually read any of that stuff? I mean, have you? Has anyone?'

'Yes, I have, actually,' Braxiatel said. 'Have you?'

'Well, no,' Jason admitted. 'Not as such. I did see this documentary once, though.'

‘Who is Dent Harper?’ Clarence asked. ‘Should I know of him?’

‘Not if you want a quiet life,’ Jason said. ‘I don’t care.’

‘He’s a sort of explorer,’ Cwej said. ‘He goes off on perilous expeditions round the new worlds of the Rim. And then he writes about them afterwards.’

‘Is that it?’

‘No. He’s rich beyond his own wildest dreams. His books are bestsellers throughout the Sector, and he’s so damned good-looking even I used to be a bit jealous of him,’ Cwej confessed.

‘But you’re not now?’ Clarence hazarded.

‘No,’ Cwej said. ‘Not a bit. A hell of a *lot*.’

Braxiatel counted off his comments on his fingers as he said, ‘This Dent Harper character is actually something of a legend. Most of it of his own making, of course. But there seems to be a good deal of truth in it all. He wears boots made from the hide of a bandersnatch he wrestled to death single-handed while camping out in the killer-mud swamps of Surtan-Deth IV. He has muscles on his muscles, an IQ that’s off the scale and an income from a trust fund that’s equivalent to the gross domestic product of several small planets. And that’s just the bit he declares for tax.’

Cwej sighed. ‘His hair is personally styled by Vital Zazoom, and his exploration clothes are sponsored by a Prestige League sokka team.’

For the first time, there was a hint of something akin to regret in Jason’s voice as he said, ‘He has degrees in subjects that I can’t even read the names of, and his explorations of the Outer Limits are legendary. They are also by appointment to Madeleine, Duchess of Nimfette.’

‘And you don’t care,’ Cwej reminded him. ‘Benny is about to set off on perhaps the most thrilling escapade of her life with this guy as her personal - and I mean *personal* - local guide, and you don’t care.’

‘They’re both booked into the Xcelsior on Virabilis,’ Braxiatel reminded him, ‘with adjoining rooms sharing a lounge area, and you don’t care.’

‘No, I don’t.’ Jason’s voice was loud and full of emotion. ‘So this guy cracks nuts by coughing very loudly, and he’s so talented that his little finger is rumoured to be going it alone.’ He shrugged. ‘Of course I don’t care. You know how much I don’t care?’

But before he could tell them, there was knock at the door.

After a flurry of exchanged glances, Braxiatel leant back in his chair and swung his feet up on to the desk. Following his cue, Cwej leapt to his feet and started examining one of the statues. Jason lounged back on the sofa, looking up at the ornate ceiling. Only Clarence looked less than totally relaxed as the door opened.

‘Oh, here you all are,’ Benny said. ‘Hi.’

‘Oh, right, yeah. Hi.’ Jason waved, and carried on looking at the ceiling.

‘What are you all up to?’ she asked suspiciously.

‘Oh, just talking about the design for the gardens,’ Braxiatel said. ‘Swapping ideas, brainstorming, you know.’

‘Want to join in?’ Cwej asked. ‘We were just saying how much you’d enjoy, er, things.’ His eyes widened slightly as he returned his attention to the statue. ‘Such detail,’ he breathed. ‘So intricate.’

‘No, thanks.’ Benny grinned. ‘But thanks, though. Glad you’re having fun. Just wanted to say goodbye, that was all.’

‘Oh, are you leaving already?’ Clarence asked. He seemed about to get to his feet, concerned, but somehow Jason’s relaxed position on the sofa was preventing him from moving.

‘Yes. Shuttle’s here. Got to run.’

‘Right,’ Braxiatel said. ‘Bye, then.’

Benny waited, obviously expecting something more.

‘Send us a postcard,’ Jason said. ‘Between you and me, I don’t think the Rim’s all it’s cracked up to be. But it’ll be good to get some first-hand feedback.’

‘You be away long?’ Cwej asked her, looking up for a moment from the statue.

‘Oh, I don’t know. Depends how much fun I’m having.’

Cwej smiled. ‘Fine. Whenever. Take your time. Enjoy yourself.’

Benny smiled back. 'I will.' She hesitated in the doorway. 'Will you... Will you miss me?' she asked quietly.

'Hmm?' Braxiatel asked. 'Oh, sorry, thought you'd gone, No, no. We'll be fine. Don't worry about us now.'

'Oh, no,' Jason agreed. 'Lots to do here. Gardens, you know.'

'Finish the interiors,' Cwej added.

'Yes, we'll miss you,' Clarence said. But the door was shut and Benny was gone. 'What?' he asked as he realized the others were staring at him.

'Never mind,' Braxiatel told him. 'You'd be hopeless at poker, you know.' He cleared his throat. 'You were just telling us, Jason, how much you don't care.'

'Oh, yes.' Jason remembered. 'Let me see now. Er...' He sucked in his cheeks. He sighed. 'What the cruck do we do about this?' he asked.

'Pray she has a really boring time and comes home?' Cwej suggested.

'Praying's not much good,' Clarence said.

'That's rich,' Jason told him, 'coming from you.'

'It's a thought, though,' Braxiatel said. There was a slight twinkle in his eye as he swung his feet off the desk. 'Listen,' he said as they all leant forward to hear him. 'I have an idea.'

CHAPTER 3

The trip to the spaceport was uneventful. Harper's taxi passed four vehicle wrecks and a recent drive-by shooting, he clicked his tongue in habitual annoyance as he waited for the traffic to clear. He was going to be late.

Not that in the event this mattered. The incoming ship lie was meeting was itself three hours late. And that was on top of the four hours late he already knew about from the spaceport arrivals bulletin site. So he had a bit of a wait.

He found a coffee bar and sat with his back to the wall, carefully examining the other clientele before deciding to order. Most of the other people in the coffee area seemed tired and worn. Harper stood out from them in that he was awake and alert. He was also the tallest, broadest and by far the most handsome of the lot. And he knew it. And the fact that he knew it was apparent in the way his slightly cleft chin was pushed forward, in the way he sat confidently upright on the uncomfortable metal chair, and the way he seemed to look down on all the others from a height even he did not actually achieve.

'Ready?' the waitress asked. She was standing close enough to seem threatening, and her apron was stained with more things than Harper had seen listed on the menu card.

'Coffee,' he said. 'Lots of milk. Not too strong.'

'Cappuccino,' she said, as if this were a local greeting 'Three dinari.'

'Three?' He looked at her face for the first time. And wished he hadn't.

'Includes service,' she said as she took the money. She was back almost immediately with something warm and wet that tasted bitter and unpleasant.

As he sipped his alleged cappuccino, a gangly youth with straggly hair brushed past Harper.

‘Sorry, mate,’ the youth muttered without pausing.

Harper grabbed the back of his loose coat and dragged him back. The youth doubled over backward, his face expressing his surprise. As he stared into Harper’s eyes, his expression changed to one of resignation. Then, as Harper deftly relieved him of the knife he was holding, apology.

‘Can’t blame me for trying,’ he said through cracked lips and over broken teeth. Then he handed Harper back his wallet.

Harper said nothing, but gave him a glare that spoke volumes. Then he shoved the youth away from him and returned his attention to his coffee. He spun the knife into a nearby rubbish bin. On the other side of the *cafe* he was aware of several young women nodding in his direction and whispering excitedly to each other. Maybe he should have bought a paper to hide behind. They would be over wanting autographs before long.

So by way of actively ignoring them, as much as anything because he was getting bored with just staring at his coffee, Harper pulled a battered notebook from his pocket and started to write in it.

I made sure I arrived early. There were the usual problems with the traffic, but I knew the back ways and short cuts of course. I was at the spaceport well ahead of the arrival of Miss Summerfield’s ship. I found a bar in a quiet area of the spaceport and sat with my back to the wall.

A quick look round was enough to satisfy myself that there would be no immediate problems with the other clientele. They seemed quiet and docile enough. Mostly between flights by the look of them. Well, who else would hang around a spaceport? The good news was that there were no lights brewing. And nobody I recognized as being out for my blood, money or honour.

The cocktail waitress was a blonde beauty who seemed out of place in such an establishment. She obviously recognized me, and we got talking. Her name was [need something romantic but not too sexy - Helena?] and she was waiting to

hear if she'd got into Val-Tec to read modern philosophy and linguistics. We hit it off straight away.

'Whiski,' I said. 'Not much ice. A strong one.'

'Five dinari,' she said huskily.

'Five?' I raised an eyebrow.

She leant closer and whispered, 'That includes service.'

I peeled off a five-dinari note from my thick wad and pressed it into her hot palm. 'A bargain,' I told her.

As I sat sipping at the strong drink, I caught sight of movement from the corner of my eye. I made use of my excellent peripheral vision to identify Tiffin Retch as he stood in the entrance to the bar, looking round. I could see at once that he had spotted me.

The knife was gleaming in his hand as he made his way inwards where I was sitting, apparently looking for a free table. As he reached me, his knife hand extended slightly. I reached out and grabbed -

'I said "excuse me".'

Harper flinched in surprise and quickly closed the notebook. A rucksack thudded on to the table in front of him, making his coffee cup jump, and the woman sat down.

'Dent Harper, right?' she said.

He nodded, waiting for the copy of one of his books to come out and get shoved in his face.

'Hi.' She held out her hand and he shook it without comment. 'I'm Benny,' she went on. 'Nice of you to come and meet me.'

'Meet?' He frowned. 'Benny... I don't think I've ever...' Then he realized, and his frown cracked into a smile. 'Benny in Bernice. Professor Summerfield.'

She smiled back. 'I recognized you from the photos on your book jackets. Mind if I sit down?'

'You are sitting down.'

She continued to smile. 'Yes. But you might still mind.'

'No. No, no problem. Sit down. Please.'

She stood up. 'Shall we go, then?'

'Go?'

‘Hotel? You know. I’ve had a long journey, could do with a change of clothes, shower, that sort of thing.’

Harper stood up. ‘Yes, of course.’ He reached for her rucksack, but she beat him to it and slung it over her shoulder. ‘We can pick up a taxi outside. Best not to have a car of your own to get burnt out in this place. Even if you could get insurance. It’s not far to the hotel anyway. Depending on the traffic.’

‘Good.’ She followed him from the coffee area. ‘It’s good to meet you, by the way.’

‘And you. Hold on tight to your bag, won’t you?’ He guided her past a group of youths, expecting a few comments if not an actual assault. But they ignored them.

‘Have to be a bit careful,’ he said quietly to Benny. ‘I expect you’ve seen a couple of muggings or a robbery already.’

She shook her head. ‘I thought it all seemed quite quiet actually. Thanks for agreeing to show me round. I never thought -’

‘It’s nothing. I’m between expeditions right now. And it’s good to meet you too.’ He turned full circle as they walked, checking they weren’t being followed, or about to be attacked from behind. But there was nobody near, nobody taking any interest at all.

They found a taxi waiting in a no-parking zone right outside the main entrance to the spaceport. The roads were surprisingly clear. There was no sign of the previous problems. Harper wasn’t sure he could remember ever having such a clear route. ‘Good trip?’ he asked.

Benny grunted. ‘Not really. Well, it was OK. But the scheduled flight from Bactural was delayed for about nine hours for some reason. Nobody seemed to know why. Pretty typical I guess.’

‘Guess so. It’s a long time since I’ve been on a scheduled flight.’

‘I’m something of an adventurer myself,’ Benny admitted. ‘That was why I thought you’d be the perfect guide to the wonders of the Eastern Rim, and Virabilis seemed the best place to start. To see the sights.’

‘Such as they are,’ Harper said. He pointed out of the window. There was a shooting here this morning. No sign of it now though. They’re not usually so keen to clear up the mess.’

‘The frontier spirit,’ Benny was saying. ‘Excitement, the thrill of the unknown. Always on the lookout for trouble, relying on your own skill and determination and courage to get out of tricky situations.’

‘Yes, it’s a bit like that.’

She settled back in the seat. ‘Can’t wait.’

From the Journal of Bernice Summerfield (aged thirty-something. And a half.)

Virabilis is a strange place. It’s like an amalgam of lots of other places I’ve been to. The spaceport is like any other spaceport, if a bit grubbier. Some of the facilities are a little antiquated and I’m told the coffee is awful. Actually, maybe it’s exactly like every other spaceport.

The journey to the hotel was a bit boring, though I can probably put that down to being tired after the trip out here. The skyline is interesting. Not least because Prevorica is so low in the sky. It’s a bit weird seeing a huge planet hanging low above the city, especially as you can see the ‘Star Ferry’ travelling between the city and another city on the lower edge of Prevorica.

The high-rises and tower blocks are what you’d expect. But below, at street level, it’s almost like a different world. The streets are littered with rubbish and people milling about. Everywhere seems to be quite dark, with the buildings being so tall and so close together. They seem to sort of hang over the narrow streets. You can go round a corner and suddenly find you’re in the middle of a street market that seems to have just sprung up suddenly. That’s great if you’re on foot, I guess. In the taxi it was a bit tricky at times.

It didn’t help that Dent Harper kept shouting at the driver and making him reverse rapidly out of the street, pulling the equivalent of a handbrake turn and zooming off again.

Harper kept muttering warnings about setups, hit squads and street scum. Didn't notice any myself, but it's to be expected in this sort of place. I haven't seen any unpleasant incidents as such yet, but Harper's whole demeanour suggests it's only a matter of time. And not much time either.

Harper himself is almost exactly as I expected. I found him in a coffee bar scribbling in a notebook. Probably some philosophical musings inspired by the thought of meeting someone famous like me. Maybe. He's tall, broad-shouldered with a Kirk Douglas chin, and he has those eyes that sort of smoulder at you. You know. I think I'll move on to something else before I have to stop for a glass of water or open a window or something.

I wonder how old he really is. I wonder how old I should be. Maybe I'll pretend that I can't remember. If nothing else that could be a cue for a description of my own latest daring exploits - saving humanity, that sort of thing. Maybe he's read my book. He didn't mention it, though. Maybe I should read it.

He does go on a bit about his own experiences. But I suppose that when you've been through as much as he has, seen as much as he has, that's natural. And I was tired after the journey, so I expect I was a bit quiet from that. Not overawed at all, mind you. Oh no. Not me.

(Later, after a drink of water.)

The hotel is typical of the mixture of old and new, ancient and modern. The building is visible from a long way out. It's distinctive as the walls are coated with some material that makes them reflective. Like mirrors. So the shape of the building is quite difficult to make out in among the other high-risers. But when you get close you find there seems to be a permanent impromptu market all around. There are stalls set up in the streets, awnings draped over the make-shift tables and wooden boxes where the locals ply their trades for the tourists. I guess a place like the Xcelsior attracts a lot of secondary industry. Like me.

Harper insisted we pay off the taxi a couple of blocks away from the hotel. Something to do with throwing off any tails. Then we walked the rest of the way to the hotel. He insisted on carrying my rucksack. Something about the pickpockets having ideas above their station, I think. But I didn't notice any trouble. Everyone seemed very friendly as we pushed through the crowds. They seemed to step aside for us, which was unexpected but nice. Probably in awe of a couple of famous travellers and adventurers. To be expected.

The hotel's quite plush. There's a big foyer, and a few bars on various floors. A sort of mezzanine area hangs out over the foyer. That's where the main restaurant is, and some sort of coffee lounge, too. There's an escalator up to it from just inside the entrance. There's even something off the main foyer that calls itself an Authentic English Pub, whatever they think that might be. No doubt we'll find out. Pretty soon I guess. It's too late to go far exploring this evening. Especially as Dent keeps giving dire warnings about the dangers of being out after dark.

Yes, this pub is probably where I'll get my first real taste of the frontier spirit. I hadn't realized how much I've been yearning for some good old-fashioned excitement. I mean, cataloguing dear old Irving's collection and helping him create a huge palace is all very well, but it doesn't offer quite the same frisson as a good punch-up.

Our rooms are sort of adjoining. There's a single door and we're both designated 1725, being on the seventeenth floor. Inside the door there's a lounge area that we share – couple of sofas and a vidscreen. Coffee table, drinks dispenser, that sort of thing. Then we each have a room off opposite sides of that. Not bad, in fact. Bed's comfy enough.

Got to go now, time to dress for dinner. Let's see, maybe the big knife and a shoulder holster to match the bulletproof T-shirt. Actually, if I'd brought more than two outfits I might be worried about what to wear.

(Extract ends)

It had taken months of planning. All of which came to fruition tonight. Which was a good thing as far as Nikole Medak was concerned. She had coped with her employer's interest - obsession even - during that time. She had run the day-to-day business while Rula Winther had spent increasing amounts of time and effort and money working out the complex details of her convoluted plan.

But some good had come of it, Nikole admitted to herself. She stood on the balcony of her room in Mrs Winther's villa, looking out over Virabilis. She could hear the sound of the waterfall on the other side of the building as the water crashed down on to the rocks far below the fortress-like stone building. It was typical, she reflected as she caught the sound of an emergency vehicle's siren from the city, that she had been given a view facing away from the rocky wilderness and the impressive cascades of water. Overlooking the sprawling, squalid metropolis that furnished their salaries and Mrs Winther's wealth.

If nothing else, the last few months had convinced Nikole beyond all doubt that it was time for Mrs Winther to relinquish her hold on the Cartel and move on. Or be moved on.

Not that Rula Winther had any inkling of her subordinate's plans for her. She had no interest in anything other than tonight's events, planned down to the last meticulous, obsessive detail.

And for what? A curiosity, no more. A bauble, a bagatelle. A piece of pretty glass set in an ornate clasp on a silver chain. Yet for this Mrs Winther had neglected the running of the street thieves, the income from the pushers and dealers, the percentages from the pimps and the cut from the affiliated armed gangs. She was losing it.

No, Nikole corrected herself, she had already lost it. And noon, once everyone was focused again on the real businesses, Nikole could begin to make it clear to the others just how off the rails Mrs Winther really was. Just how in need of a change in leadership they were. Just how qualified Nikole was for the job. Oh it wouldn't be her doing, of course.

Far from it. She was merely the catalyst. But when they came to her with an offer it wouldn't be fair or right to refuse them. And she'd get a room with a rather better view.

So tonight, for one of the last times, Nikole promised herself, she allowed Rula Winther her indulgence. Her obsession. Nikole pulled her jacket tighter about her against the chill of the evening, and went back indoors.

It was not the best restaurant that Benny had ever been to. But she could believe that it was better than most of the choices available. Certainly, it was full. They had even had to wait twenty minutes for a table. When they were eventually seated, she found that the service was dire, but the food seemed edible. And it was not far from the hotel, which was a blessing since she was still tired from her journey. Looking round at the other clientele, Benny was glad she hadn't dressed up.

Harper had. He was wearing a dinner suit that seemed to be bursting at the seams. He insisted on tasting the wine in a grubby glass. Benny was afraid that he might send it back, but he seemed to think it was up to scratch.

Benny thought it tasted of vinegar. And not a very good vinegar either. But she smiled and sipped and said nothing.

'Quiet this evening,' Harper remarked as he attacked his fish. It needed a steak knife to cut into it with any degree of success. 'Normally I'd have expected a couple of fights by now. Maybe a murder or two in the street outside.'

Benny nodded. 'Quiet evening, perhaps. All the muggers and murderers having a night off.' She lifted her fork towards her mouth. And was surprised to find it stuck halfway.

The reason it wasn't moving, she realized, was that Dent Harper had suddenly leant across the table and grabbed her hand. 'Don't look now,' he hissed to her, 'but that's Squeezer Hedges behind you.'

Of course, she turned to look. There was no problem working out who Harper meant. An extremely large and extremely ugly man was forcing his more than ample frame

through the doorway behind her. She turned back to Harper, to find him sheltering behind the wine list.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked him.

‘Don’t want to make a scene,’ Harper whispered loudly. ‘He still blames me for his sister’s wedding.’

‘Why, what happened?’

Harper peeped round the wine list, then disappeared again. ‘I didn’t turn up,’ he said. ‘Bit of a misunderstanding, actually.’

Benny looked round again. ‘I wish my ex-husband had your sense of occasion,’ she muttered. Squeezer was looking round the room through narrow eyes that seemed almost overwhelmed by his pudgy cheeks. A small, nervous waiter sidled up to him and spoke a few quiet words. Then he backed quickly away.

‘No room?’

Benny could hear his angry retort across the crowded room. Conversations stopped. Several people seemed to be reaching for pieces of cutlery for which they had previously had no need. Knives, mainly. One man grabbed an egg whisk from a trolley by his table. Then looked embarrassed.

‘What do you mean, “no room”?’

‘I’m sorry, sir. But as you see -’

Squeezer pushed the waiter aside. ‘Perhaps some of these people have nearly finished. Perhaps some are ready to leave now.’ He leant towards a booth near the door. ‘What about you two?’ His head disappeared from Benny’s view as he leant behind the screen.

A moment later it re-emerged. Squeezer stood absolutely still for a moment, looking round the room. Then, surprisingly quietly, he said. ‘So, no room tonight. No problem, then. Perhaps tomorrow.’ He coughed awkwardly. As he coughed he seemed to catch sight of Benny, and took a step towards her.

She leant back in surprise before she realized it was Harper he had seen. ‘Oops,’ Benny whispered.

Harper was looking over the top of his wine list. ‘No use pretending,’ he said to Benny. ‘Looks like he’s rumbled me.’

Apologies in advance for the mess.' He slowly stood up, laying down his napkin carefully by his plate and unbuttoning his suit jacket.

Benny looked from Harper, determined and resolute, to Squeezer, huge and dangerous.

Squeezer stopped a few yards from their table. 'Hello, Harper,' he said. His voice was still quiet. 'Having the fish, I see.'

Harper stared at him. 'Yes,' he said slowly, hands tense at his side.

Squeezer nodded. 'Good choice,' he said. 'I'd join you, but I see you have company.' He nodded to Benny. 'Good evening, ma'am,' he said politely. Then he turned and walked away.

Harper stared after him in disbelief.

As he neared the door, Squeezer suddenly turned. At once, Harper dived across the table, dragging Benny to the floor. They rolled under the next table, and together peered cautiously out from under the tablecloth.

But there was no sudden gunfire, no cough of a silenced pistol, no flurry of knives or machetes as they whirled across the restaurant. Instead, Squeezer had reached out and patted the small waiter politely on the shoulder.

'Keep me a table for tomorrow, eh?' he asked. 'If it's no trouble, that is.' And with that, he was gone, heaving his massive bulk back out through the doorway and into night.

Neither of them felt like sticking around for pudding and coffee. So Benny agreed with alacrity to Harper's suggestion that they take a short - careful - walk and end up back at the hotel pub. He insisted on paying the bill, saying it was coming out of Benny's travel fees anyway, then gently pulled Benny's chair out for her.

The waiter arrived and helped her into her jacket, lifting it off the back of the chair for her. He fumbled as he held it out for Benny to slip her arms through the sleeves, apologizing as he tried to unfold it.

'That's all right,' Benny told him. 'Well up to the usual standard of service.' She grinned as Dent laughed out loud. What a nice man.

‘Let me tell you’, Dent said as they left the restaurant, ‘about the time I took part in a Jawena hunt on Heyora Seven.’

‘Please do,’ Benny said, allowing his arm to take hers. She pressed slightly closer, expecting to feel the slight discomfort of the bulge of her purse in her jacket pocket. When it never arrived, she leapt away from Dent. ‘My purse! That bastard. I thought he was all fingers and thumbs.’

‘The waiter?’ Harper nodded furiously. ‘Probably legged it already, but we can see.’ He whirled round and almost collided with the small man behind them.

‘Oh, thank goodness I caught you,’ the waiter from the restaurant said. ‘You dropped this, madam.’ He was holding Benny’s purse.

She took it, surprised, and immediately started to look through the contents.

‘It must have dropped from your pocket when I was so clumsy with your jacket. I am so dreadfully sorry.’

‘All there?’ Dent asked.

Benny nodded. ‘Seems to be.’

‘I cannot apologize enough.’ The waiter was wringing his hands in an effort to try. ‘Since you paid in cash, I was afraid I might not find you. Of course I did not like to look in the purse for identification unless I absolutely had to.’

‘All right, all right,’ Benny said. She held out a twenty-dinari note. ‘Here, thanks.’

The waiter stared at the note in apparent disbelief. ‘Oh no,’ he said slowly, almost regretfully it seemed. ‘I really couldn’t. Thank you, but no.’ Then he turned and walked quickly back to the restaurant.

‘How extraordinary,’ Benny murmured.

‘You’re telling me,’ Dent said.

It took them half an hour to make the leisurely journey back to the hotel. It was without incident, apart from Dent’s occasional whirling round or lunging at shadows. Benny watched with amusement.

‘Are all these stories of yours true?’ she asked as he paused after giving an account of his perilous, enforced single

combat with a Marchioness of Mazzuuk. He looked hurt. 'I mean,' Benny said quickly, 'I know we're in a relatively civilized city here so far as the Rim is concerned. But it seems so quiet.'

Dent laughed. But there was a lack of mirth in the sound. 'Wait till tomorrow when we really start to see the sights,' he said. 'This place is full of cut-throats, drugs gangs, vicious criminals armed to the teeth, to say nothing of the tongs, the cartels and the different Masonic factions. Besides that, every petty drunk carries a knife and if they can afford it a gun too. And they have no qualms at all about using them. The locals will kill you rather than step off the pavement for you.'

As if to punctuate his words, a drunk lurched out of a side alley and collided with Dent. A knife clattered to the pavement, and the man scooped it up at once, turning to face Dent and Benny. The hazy light from the street lamp glinted in his eyes and on the blade. His mouth opened to reveal broken, blackened teeth.

'Beg pardon, sir, madam,' the drunk said. 'Got to look where I'm going. Accident, real sorry. Hope the knife didn't frighten the lady. I use it to peel fruit I find in the bins. If I'm lucky.'

Benny nodded. 'And I bet you have no qualms about using it,' she said. 'To peel fruit I mean.'

A single spotlight illuminated the surface of the desk. Rula Winther sat staring into the pool of light. A few minutes before, she had watched the team leave the villa, the pale lights of their vehicles winding their way along the narrow causeway towards the city. She knew every detail of the plan they had spent the last few months working out. Tonight that plan would culminate in the greatest achievement of Mrs Winther's long career.

She had been in the business of crime all her life. From being a pickpocket she had graduated to shoplifting and raiding market stalls for food and valuables. The best thing that had happened to her was being caught. The short spell In juvenile jail had taught her the trade, given her contacts,

and brought her to the attention of the notorious Mrs Maguyre. Rula Winther had fitted easily and quickly into Mrs Maguyre's organization, and within just a few years she was being groomed to take it over when Mrs Maguyre retired. Though she had not realized that at the time.

Retirement had come rather sooner than planned or expected, thanks to an Enforcement Agent's bullet in a bungled raid on the villa. Rula Winther had found herself propelled into a job she was hardly ready for, while still mourning the death of the woman who had been like a mother to her for so many years. Perhaps the saddest thing was knowing Mrs Maguyre's plans for her future happiness, knowing her intention to leave all the sordid businesses behind and tour the central sectors. For most of her life Mrs Maguyre had been the most powerful of the Cartel leaders on Virabilis. For most of her life she had looked forward to the time when she would at last be happy. But it had never come.

As she had settled quickly into the routine of running the Maguyre Cartel, Rula Winther had promised herself that she would succeed where Mrs Maguyre had so tragically failed. She would retire, when the time was right and she had a suitable successor. When the time came that she was bored with the business, she would leave it all behind. She would take her accumulated wealth and leave the Rim for good. Tonight was to be the culmination of her career, the crowning crime. The way to boost her savings and the Cartel's profits to the point where she could leave it all with something as close to a clear conscience as a woman like Rula Winther could ever claim. And the way finally to be happy herself.

Her only worry was about her successor. She knew who would take over from her when she was finished. The question was, were they ready? Did they have the necessary killer instinct?

The knock at the door disturbed Mrs Winther's thoughts, jolting her back to the present. 'Yes?' she called out.

Nikole was carrying a thin folder as she crossed the room and sat on the chair in front of the desk. She did not wait to

be told to sit, Winther noticed. That was good. She was becoming more confident, more at ease in Mrs Winther's company.

'Exactly on time, as ever,' Mrs Winther said. 'I see you've brought the weekly results.'

'Yes, Mrs Winther.'

Winther smiled. 'Still so formal. You may call me Rula, you know.'

Nikole nodded. 'I'm sorry. It seems... unprofessional somehow.'

'Well, we can't have that,' Mrs Winther agreed gently.

Nikole opened the folder and drew out several flimsy sheets of printed paper. Her short, straight hair flopped forward slightly as she did so, and she brushed it aside. Physically, Nikole Medak was everything that Mrs Winther was not. They both had dark hair, but Nikole's was slicked back and short with a hint of red in it, whereas Winther's was grey and curled with a tinge of blue. Nikole was slim with narrow shoulders, whereas Winther was broad and big-boned. Very big-boned indeed. Nikole's face was long with young, innocent features. Winther's face was round and wrinkling with age. Whereas Nikole's eyes were green and wide, Winther's were dark blue, small and narrow and seemed to be continually assessing and reassessing everything she saw.

'The takings for the week are up slightly on projections,' Nikole said. Her voice was quiet, refined, clear. 'The income from hard drugs is down a little because of the current clampdown by the Enforcement Agency, but that's more than made up for by the prostitution, gambling outlets and the small amount of legitimate trade.'

Mrs Winther waited while Nikole gave her report. She wasn't really listening. Her mind was wandering as she thought about how tonight's operation would be going; about how long it would take to examine and duplicate the technology; about how long before she would hand over to Nikole and be free of this squalid business.

After the dim streets, the hotel foyer seemed incredibly bright. Benny stood on the threshold for a moment, blinking as her eyes adjusted. She was still holding her purse. Dent Harper was still holding her arm. In the sudden bright light, this seemed a little forward, and Benny shrugged out of his grip.

‘How about that pub, then?’ she asked.

Dent smiled back. ‘We’ll give it a go,’ he said. His expression hardened. ‘But expect trouble. Even in a relatively respectable hotel like this, the bars are likely to be full of scum and lowlife. Opportunists looking for anything or anyone that isn’t fixed down.’ He nodded grimly. ‘I remember once on Spectralux while I was staying at the Vacation Inn. There was a sports bar -’

Benny held up her hand to stop him. ‘I’m fascinated,’ she said. ‘Really. But I’ll be even more fascinated with a drink in one hand.’

They were both still smiling when they were hurled apart. One moment they were leaning closer to each other, Benny’s hand still held up, her purse in her other hand, the next moment she was sprawling on the floor. With no purse.

Dent was on his feet again immediately. ‘Didn’t see him, sorry,’ he said as he raced after the thief.

Benny followed, back out into the night. Dent was standing in the fine drizzle, a way along the street, looking all around. He swore as he made his way slowly back to the hotel entrance. ‘Could be anywhere by now.’ He sighed. ‘Benny, I’m so sorry.’

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘I’m sure it happens all the time. There was nothing important in it. Only some money. Rubbish like that.’

‘Even so...’ protested Dent.

‘There is one tragic element in all this,’ Benny agreed as they went back inside.

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. Now you’ll have to buy the drinks.’

CHAPTER 4

I'm sorry. I can see that you're not interested.' Nikole tried not to sound too annoyed with the old woman. She was losing it - unable to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes these days.

'No, no,' Rula Winther said. 'It is I who am sorry. My mind was on other things.'

'The business is suffering, Mrs Winther, I'm sure. Because of your lack of attention the last month or more.' She had to be able to say she'd told her. For all the good it would do.

Mrs Winther smiled. 'But you tell me that takings are up week on week.'

'But they should be up further.'

'I'm sure I can rely on you, Nikole. You are more than capable now of running the business.'

Nikole smiled thinly. She knew that. She was surprised the old hag had even thought it, let alone said so. 'I do my best,' Nikole said. 'But it is difficult keeping track of everything, convincing everyone that I have your authority.'

A nerve twitched under Mrs Winther's left eye. 'If you have trouble with anyone in particular, let me know and they will be sorted out,' she said. Her voice was a husky rasp of annoyance. 'You have my complete confidence, Nikole. You are in charge now, in everything but name.'

Everything but name. Everything but name and position, and cut of the takings. 'We shall be glad of your renewed attention after tonight, Mrs Winther.'

Rula Winther looked at Nikole for a moment. Her eyes seemed almost to narrow still further, so that there was little but a glint of reflected light visible beneath the lids. 'I know you don't approve of my current... enterprise, Nikole.'

Nikole said nothing. She put the papers back inside the folder and sat quietly as Mrs Winther went on.

‘But, believe me, there is immense profit to be had from tonight’s work. And not just material wealth, either. Not just the licensing of the technology.’

Nikole sighed. She had not dared to voice her thoughts so openly before, but now seemed as good a time as any. ‘But, Mrs Winther,’ she said, ‘so much effort. So much expense.’

‘It will be worth it.’

‘Will it? For what? A forgotten relic of a forgotten civilization. Nobody knows anything much about it, after all.’

‘I know.’

‘Yes, madam. But for all your confidence in the value of the thing, for all the careful planning, it is not itself deemed specially important. The security measures are to protect the other valuables in the collection, yet we plan to leave those untouched.’

Winther sighed. ‘Yes. We must make this seem like a bungled attempt to steal something that has more intrinsic wealth. We must make it seem like it went wrong, and the thieves escaped with precious little.’

‘But that’s just it. Precious little.’ Nikole shook her head. ‘I mean, madam... A piece of glass.’

Rula Winther seemed saddened by the comments. ‘Trust me, Nikole,’ she said quietly. ‘You of all people have to trust me. Dorpfeld’s Prism is far more than just a piece of glass.’

‘A piece of glass with some vague ancient curse on it?’ Nikole said loudly. She stood up. ‘A piece of glass so unremarkable we are hoping that nobody will even miss it. I’m sorry, Mrs Winther. I don’t see the point.’

‘I’m sorry too, Nikole.’ Winther leant back in her chair and closed her eyes. So far as Nikole could tell. ‘You may leave me,’ she whispered thickly. ‘I shall wait up for the team to return.’

‘Yes, Mrs Winther,’ Nikole murmured as she let herself out of the room.

As I was saying, it was on Spectralux. I think I told you that I was staying at the Vacation Inn at the time. There was what purported to be a sports bar on the top floor. It was in the

middle of a revolving restaurant. The restaurant's mechanism had been broken for years, and so it was up to the sports bar to try to convince the clientele it still worked. They did a good job for the most part.

'Why was it called a sports bar? As far as I could tell it was because there was a spinball hoop in the middle. You could pay for shots, and if you got three balls through the hoop in a go, they gave you a free drink. A very small free drink. Apart from that and the fact that the cocktail waitresses all wore white shorts and long woollen socks...

'Sorry, where was I? Oh yes. Well, I had just returned from a foray into the Uncharted Isles. I don't know if you've heard of them. Probably not, since they had to change their name soon after I went. I was with Matrik Ungeles, the famous cartographer, and we stayed at the Vacation Inn on our route back to the port.

'Anyway, I asked for a couple of goes at getting the ball through the hoop. There was some hilarity, and one guy on the other side of the bar bet another that there was no way I'd get two in a row, let alone three. I didn't pay much attention, not being a betting man. Probably they hadn't realized that from my earlier observations I was well aware that there was a small gravitic whirlpool inducer built into the rim of the net. But I reckoned I could compensate for that by spinning the ball ever so slightly anticlockwise and bouncing off the backboard at a given tangent to the generated field. You get the idea I'm sure. But anyway, the stakes got quite high, it seems, as I took aim for my first throw.

'While I was enjoying the free whisky-soda, I could hear a commotion from where the betting men had been drinking. I ignored it, and concentrated on getting the last drop from my glass. That always seems more important when someone else is paying. Then, of course, I needed another drink. So I asked for another go at throwing the balls. It worked out just cheaper than buying another whisky, though still a horrendous price.

"What do you mean, can't pay? It was a bet!"

‘Well, I ignored the noise from across the bar and settled for convincing the barman that, yes, I could have another go, but that really would be the last and I quite understood that he had to make a living here. Whatever. It was hardly making myself heard above the raised voices, shouts, and then cries. The sound of metal meeting soft resistance was especially distracting, but I did my level best to keep my mind on the task in hand.

I suppose it was an instinctive reaction. I caught the first ball as it was lobbed my way.

“Here, try with this.” The laughter was raucous and unpleasant, but the sentiment seemed fine.

“Thanks,” I said as I caught the ball, already concentrating on achieving a karmic moment ready for the throw. Even so, it did occur to me that it was odd that a spinball should be hairy round one side.

‘And sticky.’

Harper paused. ‘Am I boring you?’ he asked.

He tried not to sound miffed, but Benny could tell he was. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘No, it’s fascinating. I was distracted, that’s all.’

‘Oh?’

‘There was a guy...’ Benny had caught sight of the man ogling her from the other side of the room, and spent most of Dent’s narrative trying to avoid the man’s eyes, trying to pretend she didn’t know he was staring at her.

‘Where?’ Dent asked in a tone that suggested he had already rolled up his metaphorical sleeves and was ready to dive in and protect Benny’s honour. And anything else that needed protecting.

‘Well, that’s just it,’ Benny said. ‘He was making more eyes at me than a bad potato with glasses. Then before I could stop him, he... He just got up and left.’ She shook her head. ‘I’m glad my purse got snatched,’ she said.

Dent stared at her open-mouthed. ‘Sorry?’

‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘Things have been so quiet and ordinary I was beginning to think that it was all made up by the tourist Board or something.’ She smiled and patted Dent’s

solid shoulder. 'No offence, but I was starting to wonder if all your stories, your books and traveller's tales weren't just a teeny-weency bit exaggerated.'

'Exaggerated?' Dent's face was darkening, his eyebrows creeping down low over his eyes.

'So I'm glad my purse got snatched,' Benny said quickly. 'Restores my confidence in your veracity. Redoubles my faith in the fundamental unpleasantness of human nature.'

While she had been speaking, a thin young man with greased-back hair had been standing politely beside them, obviously waiting for an opportunity to say something without interrupting or causing offence.

'Excuse me,' he said sheepishly.

'Yes, can I help you?' Dent asked abrasively.

'Er, yes. That is...' The man shuffled his feet in evident embarrassment. 'It was wrong. I'm so sorry.'

Benny and Dent exchanged looks. Benny tapped her temple with her forefinger. 'The pub weirdo,' she mouthed. Dent frowned, and she shook her head. Never mind.

'Here,' the man said before they could do the whole sign-language course. He thrust out his hand towards Benny. He was holding something. She smiled sympathetically, and risked a quick look. 'I never...' the man said. 'That is, I'm not a believer. At least I wasn't. But the Lord moves in mysterious ways. I know I sinned. God knows I sinned. Please...' His voice cracked under the emotion. 'Please forgive me.'

Benny swallowed, and looked back at Dent. He stared back at her, as incredulous as she was. 'I forgive you,' Benny mumbled as she took back her purse. 'Now go forth and sin no more,' she added.

'Thank you.' The man clapped his hands together as if in prayer. 'God is good,' he said as he shuffled away. 'Forgiveness. A second chance. I have seen his messenger and been given a second chance.'

'You were saying,' Dent said, 'about being glad your purse was stolen?'

‘Oh,’ Benny said. ‘Nothing.’ She blew out a long breath then drained her glass in one. ‘Let me buy you another drink,’ she said.

Luggar was a big man. In his youth he had been fit and powerful. Now he was pudgy and powerful. In his younger days he had been at the sharp end, had led the most important raids and put the squeeze on those who stood up against his mistress. But now he knew he was past it. It was good of Mrs Winther to keep him on, he knew. But he was fiercely loyal, devoted even. He was never far from her side, and he would die for her, for the Cartel. That was his job, after all.

He sat outside the door to Rula Winther’s study, arms folded, staring at the far wall. There were several popular magazines and a financial report on the low table beside him. But he had already looked at all the pictures in the magazines. He hadn’t opened the report.

He stood up at once as the door behind him opened, livening, Mrs Winther.’

‘It’s the middle of the night, Luggar. You needn’t wait up, you know.’

‘I don’t sleep ‘less you sleep, Mrs Winther.’

She smiled and nodded. ‘We’re getting old, Luggar,’ she said quietly. ‘We don’t need so much sleep now. Yet we have more time for it while the youngsters do the work. Strange, isn’t it?’

Luggar didn’t answer. He knew her well enough to know she didn’t expect him to.

Rula Winther crossed to the window, threw it open and looked out. In the distance were the lights of the city. Luggar stood behind her. They both stood in silence for several minutes.

‘She doesn’t understand, you know,’ Winther said at last, without turning. ‘Nikole doesn’t understand yet. But one day she will.’ From somewhere in the distance the wind brought the faint wail of a siren.

‘Then there’s being able to relax,’ Winther said. ‘That would help. It’s difficult to sleep when you know there are so many people out there just waiting to knife you in the back. She’ll learn that. Just as I did. She’ll find that there’s no end to it. No end to the cycle of violence and greed and blood. No end except...’

She turned suddenly from the window. The wind ruffled her short hair as she faced Luggar. ‘Do you understand why I want Dorpfeld’s Prism so badly?’ she asked. ‘Do you know why I have to have it?’

Luggar shook his head and shrugged. She would tell him, whatever his answer.

‘It’s the way to break out of the cycle. To escape the torture, the maiming, the kidnapping, drugs, everything.’ She gave a half-smile. It did not reach her sad eyes. ‘Every job we do just adds to the cycle. It increases the bounty on each of our heads. Especially mine. I know you and the others see that as a sign of success. But it’s an invitation to an assassination. Only a matter of time.’ She shook her head. ‘And what’s it worth after all? After the bribes, the kick-backs, the expenses and everyone’s cut, the take is so thin as to be inconsequential. Just enough to carry us on the next job. And so the cycle goes on. Until now.’

‘Yes, Mrs Winther.’ He had little idea what she was talking about, but a comment seemed to be required. Luggar was happy enough with his lifestyle and with the money he made. And she was quite right: the more he was worth in terms of bounty the higher up the criminal career ladder he reckoned he had climbed. It was to do with respect. And it was to do with pride.

‘This is the Big One, Luggar.’ She nodded seriously. This is it. With this one I can retire. Not grow old and die in the business, or feel the knife as it goes into my sleeping back, This is the way to break out of the cycle.’ She turned away suddenly, her voice breaking slightly as she said, ‘And I want out, Luggar. Enough is enough. Just for once I want...’ Her voice dropped to a whisper. ‘I want to be happy.’

The motion sensors were keyed to heat patterns. They said the street was empty, and so was the surrounding area at that end of the building. Powlo Vertutes gave the signal, and his team started work. A pulse-router attached to the communications line intercepted all impulses both in and out of the building, while a software patch disabled the alarm system by telling them they had already been triggered.

It took just twelve minutes to set everything up. Then they were ready to go in.

Miklos Frunt stood in the shadow of a doorway and looked up and down the street. It was empty, so he started work. He pulled a pair of wire cutters from inside his trench coat and severed the main communications link. If anyone noticed they would blame the comms company, at least until the morning.

The alarm was more tricky. He spliced a wire between the two cables in and out of the main system, then cut the cables above the splice. He kept his fingers crossed, which made it a little tricky to squeeze the cutters.

It took just two minutes to sort everything out. Then he was ready to go in.

A sonic influx pulser confused the main lock so that they could open the door. They pulled night-vision goggles down as they entered, not wanting any light to be seen from outside. A wave-form digital-corruption inducer straight out of the test labs at Mi-Tek meant that the images from the cameras would be nothing but a blizzard of white.

The target was in the basement of the office building, in an area reserved for the corporate collection of odds and ends dredged up from various mines or donated by planetary governments only too pleased to have some of their unemployment assuaged by the arrival of the Davidia Off-world Mining Corp. Some of the items were very highly insured. It was because of them that the alarm system was so advanced. These were not the items that Powlo's team was after.

In case the elevator pattern was logged, they planned to use the emergency stairs on the other side of the building to descend.

A thin plastic card was enough to break the locking circuit. The door sprang open and Frunt let himself into the building. He had a small torch. If anyone from outside saw the light, the chances were they would ignore it. If not, they would assume it was a security guard making his rounds. Frunt happened to know that the security company that organized the guards was at the point of financial collapse where it could not afford to pay the staff. Not that they had told their clients that.

He also knew there were security cameras. That was why he was wearing a large mask moulded into a caricature of a prominent local politician. He waved cheerily to the nearest camera as he passed.

He sauntered over to the elevator and pressed the call button.

Powlo waited while his best technician checked the door at the top of the stairs. It could be wired for tampering, or microwave-linked directly to the fire alarm and emergency services. The technician gave the thumbs-up and carefully opened the door. They made their way slowly down to the basement, keeping alert, listening for any sound.

The lift doors opened, and Frunt stepped out. He shone his torch round the large basement area. On the wall nearby was a schematic showing what each of the exhibits was, together with a brief explanation. He ran his gloved finger down the list until he found what he was looking for.

The display case was in a corner, close to an emergency exit. A quick examination satisfied Frunt that there was no laser cage protecting the exhibit. He hesitated for a moment, peering into the display case at the exhibit inside. The clear crystal in its silver mounting reflected the light from the torch, patterns seeming to form and dance within. The chain

was looped round the case, so that it was apparent that the jewel was intended to be worn as a necklace. It was all just as it had been described to him.

They had discussed whether the sound of breaking the cabinet would be a problem. That had been just about the full extent of the planning - half an hour's hushed discussion over a couple of beers. They had decided it would not.

They had been wrong.

Powlo pushed open the door at the bottom of the stairs, alert for any movement or extra alarm circuits. Every move had been planned down to the last detail. Months of meticulous effort, three-dimension sim scenarios, what-if risk analyses, extrapolation index mapping... Tonight's mission was the culmination of the long and heated discussions about how best to approach the problem. Powlo was as confident as his hand-picked team that nothing could go wrong now.

He froze, halfway through the door as the basement exhibition area echoed with the sudden sound of breaking glass.

The necklace was heavier than he had expected. Frunt held it for a moment, dangling at arm's length from the handle of the wire cutters he had used to smash the top of the display case. He had been warned to keep the thing well away from his body. Not that he believed any of that rubbish about ancient curses. But, just the same, it was with a sigh of relief that he dropped the necklace into a small bag surfaced with a molecular lining of lead.

Then he heard the sound of running feet, and turned quickly.

The small pool of light from his torch splashed across the forms of the four black-clad figures racing towards him. Their faces were covered with goggles, and, as he moved the torch beam upward, they seemed to shy away, hands at their faces in surprise and shock.

Frunt didn't wait to work out why. He ran.

Instinctively he ran back the way he had come, towards the lift. The four men chasing him were far enough behind for him to be able to get inside and close the door before they caught up with him. He jabbed at a button at random, praying they would not reach the lift quickly enough for the doors to open for them. He let out a long breath as he felt the elevator begin to ascend.

It stopped on the ground floor, the doors opening lethargically to let Frunt shoot out as if under pressure. He set off across the main foyer of the building at a terrified run. Ahead of him, a fire door crashed open and a dark figure appeared. Frunt spun in mid-step, changing course and heading off deeper into the building. So far everything had happened in near silence. The sound of the silenced laser bolt smacking into the wall just beside Frunt's head was hardly louder than the sound of his breath. But he ran all the faster nonetheless.

He was barely thinking, just running. So it was as much by luck as any planning that he found he had circled the block where the lifts were and returned to the main-entrance foyer. The doors were shut - heavy slices of clear glass through which he could see the neon night outside. He raced towards them, wondering what he would do when he got there.

As it happened, he did not have to worry. Detecting his approach, and locked only against people trying to *enter* the building, the door slid soundlessly open to allow him out. The sound of the outside world was loud inside the building as he approached the opening doors. Somewhere an emergency siren was wailing. Litter was blowing across the street. In a nearby building a child was crying.

And behind him the men were screaming and shouting now as they followed him out into the light rain.

'You know,' Benny said as she sipped at her beer, 'I'm not convinced.'

'Oh?'

'This place - the Rim - it's not the new frontier at all, is it?'

'What do you mean?' Dent asked, frowning.

'I think it's all some sort of publicity stunt. If I didn't know you so well, I'd begin to doubt the absolute precise truth of the details of your accounts of derring-do and life close to the edge.'

He just stared at her, drink untouched.

Benny sighed. 'Sorry,' she said. 'But really. I mean...'

Still he did not reply.

'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes... It's worse than Samuel Beckett.' She shook her head and took another swig of beer.

'It's not usually this quiet.' He tried to keep from sounding too miffed. 'Really it's not.'

'Sure. Sorry.' She smiled at him. 'Quiet day, I suppose. And I'm still tired from the journey. Tomorrow you can show me what it's really like.'

'Yeah,' he said, attempting a smile in return. 'Let's do that.' There was an awkward pause, then Dent said, 'I'll be back in a minute.' He smiled with good humour he did not feel, and stood up from the bar stool.

'Sure,' Benny replied in a casual manner that suggested she knew where he was going.

But she didn't, Dent was sure. He made his way quickly across the bar, glancing back to see if Benny was watching. She wasn't, and he pushed open the door back into the main part of the hotel. The door through which had recently departed the wild-eyed lunatic who had snatched and then returned Benny's purse.

Fruent's lungs felt as if they were about to burst out of his chest. His throat was sore, and he was wet through from the rain. His hand was caught inside his coat pocket as he ran, trying to pull out the mobile comm. He had to find somewhere to hide, to hope they would miss him in the night. With something of a shock he realized where he was. Fruent turned quickly into an alley and ducked behind a large rubbish skip. He pulled open the lid and considered climbing inside, but dismissed the idea at once. Once inside he might never get out again.

He held his ragged breath as the four dark figures passed the end of the alley. They paused for a moment, and Frunt could see them clearly for the first time. They had removed the goggles now, and were holding a small device, looking at the screen.

‘Too much interference,’ one of the men said, his voice just carrying to where Frunt was hiding. ‘Can’t make out a single trace line in among everyone else.’

‘Let’s keep going this way,’ one of the others said. ‘If we lose him, Mrs Winther’ll have our guts for harp strings.’

He froze. Mrs Winther. Oh God, if the Cartel was after him, he had no chance. Frunt looked round desperately. Inside he was as cold as outside now. He realized his hand was inside his coat pocket again, and pulled out the comm, hitting one of the quick-dial buttons.

The call was answered almost immediately. ‘Is that you?’ the man at the other end asked.

‘Of course it’s me,’ Frunt hissed back. ‘Who else would call you at this time?’

‘Where are you?’

‘Right outside. But I can’t come in. Listen, there’s a problem. A big problem.’ He looked round warily, then hissed, ‘The Cartel are after me. They were there, at the building. I think they’re after the relic.’

‘Are you OK?’

‘No, I’m not. They’ll kill me if they find me. You know that.’

The voice was low and urgent. ‘Miklos, listen, I can’t help you -’

‘I know that. And don’t worry: I won’t lead them to you.’

‘I would if I could. If there was any way -’

‘Rubbish,’ Frunt snapped.

‘Well, there’s no need to get -’

‘You’re trash,’ Frunt hissed. ‘You hear that?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. ‘Got to go. If I manage to get away, I’ll meet you as arranged. If not... goodbye.’ Frunt ended the call and stared at the communicator for a moment. He had to get somewhere he could lose himself. He needed lights, people.

Lots of people. He stuffed the comm back into his pocket and peered out from behind the skip.

Just as a dark figure appeared at the end of the alley. With a shout, the figure started down the narrow alley towards Frunt.

The porter at the main doors remembered the young man, and pointed out to Dent where he had gone. In fact, he had not gone far. Dent found him wandering along the pavement, ignoring the rain that had plastered his greasy hair across the scalp. He was walking slowly, eyes raised to heaven and hands clasped together. With his heavy, damp coat on he looked like a monk on his way to matins.

Dent walked beside him for a few yards. The man ignored him. So he stepped in front and put his hand on the man's chest to stop him.

The man seemed surprised, but he made no attempt to run away, and said nothing. He just stared at Dent, his eyes wide and empty.

'What's going on?' Dent asked. 'Just tell me that.'

'I don't understand.'

'No.' Dent pushed his finger dangerously close to the man's nose. A drop of rainwater detached itself from the end of the nose and dripped on to Dent's finger. He shook it off in annoyance. 'It's me who doesn't understand. You're a petty pickpocket. We both know that. I haven't seen you before, but we both know you snatched Benny's purse, and we both know that it wasn't the first purse you've grabbed. Was it?'

The man shook his head. 'But that was before...' He raised his eyes to the sky again. 'Before I was... converted.'

'Oh come on!' Dent yelled. 'Don't give me that. You bring back the purse and gabble on about some miraculous conversion. You're a street rat. Filthy scum like you don't just get religion.'

'I thought not,' the man admitted. His voice was quiet, patient. 'But I have seen God's messenger. He told me to return the purse. To go and sin no more.'

'Who did?' Dent demanded. 'Who told you?'

The man seemed bored with the conversation now, and started walking again. He pushed past Dent and clasped his hands together again as he answered. 'An angel,' he said.

CHAPTER 5

The rain was getting heavier. Jason had to peer through the murk of the night and the weather to see what Dent Harper was up to. He watched as the man Clarence had scared half to death an hour earlier pushed past Harper and headed off up the street. Jason shook his head. The poor guy would never be the same. They had deprived him of his only form of income. Still, sacrifices had to be made.

He ducked back into the shadows as Harper returned to the hotel. Jason gave him a count of twenty, then followed him back in. Not that Harper would recognize him, but it was as well to keep out of sight as far as possible. The restaurant had been the trickiest - trying to arrange for a booth where Benny couldn't see them, but they could peep out at her and Harper.

Throughout the hotel's entrance foyer there were small islands formed out of chairs clustered round low tables. Jason chose a chair where he could see through the glass pane in the door into the pub area and tell if Benny was coming. He could also see Clarence. And Clarence could see him.

After a few moments, Clarence got up from the corner table well behind where Benny was seated at the bar, Harper once more beside her.

'Any problems?' Jason asked as Clarence joined him. The angel was in disguise. His wings were folded inside his large, full-length coat. He seemed to be wearing a rucksack, but in fact this was an empty hollow over the bulge in his coat where the wings were folded. So much for disguising the fact he was an angel. Jason did his best not to laugh at the wiry, curly, dark hair and the floppy black moustache that were designed to keep Benny from recognizing her friend should she catch sight of him. Given that Clarence had managed to

grow them out of his exterior body 'shell', Jason reckoned he could have made them more convincing. But getting him to wear clothes even had been something of a battle. Explaining why Clarence had to be disguised when Jason's camouflage amounted to a clean shirt and parting his hair on the other side, not that anyone could tell, had been a diplomatic tour de force.

'He did not mention angels,' Clarence said in what was intended to be a conspiratorial tone. 'He seemed to be claiming that he had been providing work for a plumbing engineer.'

Jason nodded. He was beginning to be able to decipher Clarence's rather literal interpretations now. 'So he told her he'd been for a leak. Makes sense. He must be pretty bewildered by all this.'

Clarence considered. 'Should we not bring him in on it?' He sounded out the words carefully.

Jason smiled at the colloquialism. 'No, I don't think so. He might let something slip. Or he might just tell her. It would be difficult to think of a plausible justification for what we're up to.' He checked through the door, and could see Benny and Harper smiling at each other over their half-empty drinks. 'I have trouble thinking of one,' he added quietly.

'It is for her own good,' Clarence reassured him.

'Yes,' Jason said. 'Of course it is.' He stood up. 'Come on, we'd better get back in there in case anything unpleasant looks about to happen.' He shook his head. 'This place is the pits. You can't walk the street safely in broad daylight.'

Clarence shielded Jason from view as they slipped into the pub. They resumed their place at the table in the corner, several of the other drinkers shuffling uneasily in their seats as they caught sight of the pair. Two got up and left quickly.

'We should report back to Brax,' Jason said. 'Let him know how it's going.' He beckoned to a waiter, who came scurrying over. 'I'm glad we managed to delay her flight at Bactural so we got here first.'

'Yes, sir?' the waiter oiled.

'Nothing for my friend,' Jason said. 'I'll have water.'

‘Yes, sir.’

Jason caught his sleeve as he turned to leave. ‘Big one,’ he said.

They settled back to watch Benny and Harper. And then leant forward again. There seemed to be some sort of argument going on with the bar staff.

‘It’s nonstop,’ Jason said. ‘Not a moment’s peace.’ He waved to the waiter heading their way with a jug of water and a glass. ‘What now?’ he asked.

‘Oh some minor trouble, sir.’ The waiter poured water into the glass. His hand was shaking and the ice clinked together noisily in the jug. ‘Lady at the bar doesn’t seem to be able to pay her bill.’

Jason and Clarence looked at each other. ‘What is it with that woman?’ Jason said to Clarence. To the waiter he said, ‘I want to see the manager. Now. While you’re still breathing.’

It was the principle of the thing that got Benny. ‘Look,’ she said in what she considered to be an entirely reasonable tone of voice, ‘I know I haven’t got enough cash with me. But since I’m a guest at this excellent hotel, why don’t we just put it on my room bill?’

Dent leant across, holding a wad of notes. ‘Here,’ he said gently, ‘let me.’

She pushed his arm aside. ‘No way,’ she said fiercely. ‘My tab. I pay it. Right?’

‘Wrong,’ the barman said. ‘Very wrong.’

‘Oh, and why’s that?’

‘Because your room doesn’t have a credit facility here, that’s why.’ The barman smiled as if he was imparting good news. ‘It’s the package you’re on.’

‘You’ll be inside a package in a minute,’ Benny told him. ‘You bill my room, I pick up the bill at the end of my stay. Simple.’

‘Sorry,’ the barman said. ‘Cash only, Miss Summerfield.’

‘It’s Professor, actually,’ Benny said through tightly clenched teeth.

‘Then sorry, Miss Professor.’

After that, things got noisy. Dent waved his wad. Benny pushed it away. The barman tried to grab it, and Benny stood up and almost grabbed him. They were all shouting.

'I demand to see whoever's in charge here,' Benny screamed eventually. She was tired of shouting at the barman.

'No way,' the barman shouted back. Nobody sees the manager. Not even me. Nobody.'

There was a moment's silence after this. It was interrupted by a polite cough. 'Professor Summerfield?' a calm voice asked.

Benny turned. A thin man immaculately dressed in a suit was standing behind her. He was wearing a bow tie and a smug expression. 'I'm the manager,' he said. 'And I have some good news for you.'

'Oh,' said Benny, sitting down. 'Right.'

When the manager had gone, Dent and Benny stared at each other for a while.

'Bit of luck,' Dent said. 'Congratulations.'

'Mmm,' said Benny. 'One hundredth customer this evening. As you say, bit of luck.'

'Does this happen every night?' Dent asked the barman.

'I've not come across it before. The free-drinks-for-the-hundredth-customer thing, I mean.'

The barman grabbed a clean glass and started polishing it vigorously. 'I, er, I think it's only on special occasions,' he said indistinctly.

'So what's the occasion?' Benny asked.

'Excuse me,' the barman mumbled quickly. 'Someone to serve round the other side. Bye.'

There was absolute silence for several moments after Rula Winther broke the connection. Luggar waited for her to speak before he ventured anything.

'Those idiots,' she hissed at last. 'Can't even grab a necklace without bungling things.' She paced up and down like a cat. A large, heavy cat. 'Letting a petty thief beat them

to it. Letting him get away...' She was shaking her head and bunching her hands into fists as she paced.

Luggar coughed politely. 'Would you like me to sort it out, Mrs Winther?' He might be getting old, but he wasn't past it yet.

She stopped at once, and looked at him. Her round, red face broke into a smile. 'Would you? You're such a dear.' She went over to him and patted his hand gently. 'Lou, you're a treasure. You know what this means to me.'

Luggar smiled, or as close as he ever got. His cheeks looked permanently bruised, and they shifted position slightly as his teeth emerged from between his thin lips. 'No problem, Mrs Winther.'

It was getting late. Or, rather, early. Benny had enjoyed listening to Dent's accounts of life under canvas on Chiropodie Seven and his daring escape from the ravening hordes of Incumen on Ostrakovik Milonides. She was looking forward to tomorrow's excursions and finally, she hoped, getting to see some of the real action and excitement she had come for. She was not quite sure what form it would take, but she was certain she had not run into it yet.

The pub had filled up during the course of the night, and it was now into the early hours. The tables were situate close together, and people were standing between them now. Benny dived in and forced her way through the crowd round the bar. Dent was somewhere behind her - no doubt he'd catch her up.

As she pushed her way through the milling people with shouts of 'Excuse me' and 'Gangway', Benny felt a sudden pain in her thigh. Looking down and sideways she saw that she had bumped into a table she had failed to notice. 'Sorry,' she called and pushed on.

A hand grabbed her and yanked her back. 'You spilt Mr Canley's drink,' a rough voice coughed into her ear as she was pulled down so her head was level with that of the enormous gorilla-shaped man sitting on one side of the table. On the other side of the table was another large man, his

huge hands clasped together in a pool of spilt fruit juice. His face was darkening even as Benny watched.

‘I said sorry, didn’t I?’ she shouted at them. ‘If you stick your table right in the thoroughfare, what do you expect?’ She pulled herself free of the man’s grip and pushed her way onward.

‘Hurry up,’ Dent’s voice hissed in her ear. ‘That was Heath Canley.’

‘He didn’t actually introduce himself,’ Benny called back. ‘What’s the problem?’

Dent took her arm. ‘The problem is’, he said, ‘that Canley is the leader of one of the major drug gangs on the Rim. People tend to disappear when he’s around, and that’s just people nearby. The people who upset him...’ He let the sentence hang in the air.

‘Best to leave quickly with our dignity intact, then,’ Benny said. ‘He didn’t look that dangerous.’

‘He used to be a Quagmer wrestler.’

‘Is that something impressive?’ Benny asked as they reached the door.

‘Have you ever seen a Quagmer?’ Dent said.

As Canley’s bodyguard rose massively to his feet, a hand clamped down on his shoulder. He knocked it aside instinctively and continued to rise.

‘I’d wait just a moment if I were you.’

The voice belonged to a tall scruffy man with dark-brown hair that seemed to be fighting against the way it was parted. He was wearing boots and grubby slacks together with a shirt that had been a stranger too long to the ironing table. And he was grinning in a way that suggested he knew something the bodyguard didn’t.

‘Why’s that?’ the bodyguard demanded, glancing across the room to check that he could see where the woman who had spilt his employer’s drink was headed.

‘You see the guy at the table in the corner?’ the scruffy man said.

Both the bodyguard and Canley followed the man's pointing finger.

'That's Bruiser Mulrooney.'

The bodyguard looked again at the man in the corner. He was tall and thin and seemed to be sitting down with a rucksack on his back so that he had to hunch forward slightly. His hair was a mass of black curls and an obviously false moustache flopped across his upper lip.

'Bruiser Mulrooney?' Canley said. His face was darkening still further. It was, the bodyguard knew, a bad sign.

'Yeah. Bruiser Mulrooney.' The scruffy man looked at Canley. 'You know, runs the Assassination Bureau. Amputations without anaesthetic a speciality. Amaze your friends by having them dipped in cement and tossed over the side of the Star Ferry so that they make a star-shaped splat when they land and you can say, "That's how it got its name." *That* Bruiser Mulrooney.'

Canley and the bodyguard both turned back towards the man with the floppy moustache. 'I didn't recognize him,' Canley said. His voice was a coarse grating of sound.

The bodyguard had never heard of Bruiser Mulrooney, but he did not think it helpful to say so.

'Well obviously, he's in disguise,' the scruffy man said with a hint of annoyance. 'I mean, look at the wig and moustache.'

'So?' Canley asked.

'So the woman's with him. The woman that your large employee here was about to accost.'

'So?' Canley said again. But there was a trace of contrition in his voice now.

'So if your man was hurrying after her to apologize for the table being in her way, then Bruiser thinks that's a fine and courteous gesture and would like to buy you another drink. Several drinks in fact.' The man leant a little closer. 'But if not then it's a free ticket on the ferry.' He winked. 'Know what I mean?'

Canley stared back at the man for several seconds. His face was still dark, and his lower lip was trembling slightly in a

way that the bodyguard did not altogether like. 'I could use another drink,' he said at last. 'Thanks.'

They all looked across the room to where Bruiser was looking back at them. Bruiser smiled. And waved. The scruffy looking man sighed and let out a long breath. 'I'll get those drinks,' he said. 'Have a nice day.'

They were waiting for the lift when the gorilla found them. His suit seemed to be stretching dangerously close to breaking point as Dent turned to face him.

'Leave this to me,' Dent whispered to Benny.

'I don't usually let people fight my battles for me,' Benny said. She looked again at the huge man as he stood with his hands clasped in front of him. 'But OK, just this once then.'

The massive man lifted a hairy paw and pointed it at Benny. 'You walked into Mr Canley's table,' he growled.

'Did I?' Benny ventured. 'Oh yes, slight collision. Bit of an accident.'

'Too right,' the man replied. His eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

Dent was beginning to tense, hands already clenched into fists.

'Sorry,' the huge man said.

'Yes,' said Benny. 'Absolutely. Terribly and completely sorry.'

The man's head tilted slightly to one side as if he was having trouble understanding the conversation. 'No,' he said at last, 'Mr Canley's sorry. He sends his apologies. Won't happen again.'

Benny blinked.

'He hopes', the man went on, 'that your clothes did not get wet due to his clumsiness.'

Dent was standing with his hands clenched and his mouth open.

Benny recovered first. 'No,' she said. 'No, no problem there. Really.' She grinned at Dent. 'Just send a bouquet of flowers to my room and we'll forget all about it, OK?'

There was a 'ding' from behind them and both Benny and Dent flinched. As soon as the lift door had opened they tumbled inside.

The door opened into the small shared lounge area, and Dent flopped down into a sofa once they were inside. 'What were you thinking of?' he demanded. 'Flowers?' He shook his head.

'Nice touch, I thought,' Benny told him.

'I was amazed you got an apology rather than a steel spike between the eyes, but then to make a crack like that...'

'Oh come on,' Benny said. 'He was perfectly charming. To come after us just to say sorry when really it was, I admit, my fault

Dent was shaking his head. 'He didn't come to say sorry. There's something else going on. We were lucky the lift arrived before we found out what it was.'

Benny sighed and went over to the door into her rooms. 'Look, Dent,' she said, 'I appreciate your tales of danger and mystery and intrigue, really I do. But everyone here is just as nice as pie. There's no criminal element waiting to gun you down round every corner. It's just your imagination. Now, I'm tired, and this place is not really what I expected. Let me get some sleep and then you can show me whatever sights there are and we'll see how much of the frontier spirit is actually left.'

Dent was staring back at her with a sympathetic expression. 'There's something up, something happening,' he said. 'I can feel it.'

'Look,' Benny said, 'why can't you accept that sometimes when people say sorry they really mean it?'

Before Dent could reply there was a knock at the door.

'Oh yeah?' Dent hissed across the room. 'Leave this to me.'

Benny shrugged. 'Worked last time,' she muttered.

'Room service,' a voice called.

'Huh!' Dent said. He took up position behind the door, back to the wall. His knees were slightly bent and he had produced a small pistol from somewhere inside his jacket. He nodded to Benny.

‘Yes, come in,’ she called.

The door opened slightly. But it was enough for Dent to grab it and wrench it the rest of the way. As the door opened, Dent rolled across the carpet, leaping up into a classic posture — gun raised, legs braced apart, leaning into the recoil.

Then he put the gun away. ‘Thanks,’ he said as he took the huge bouquet of flowers from the surprised maid. ‘Thanks very much. Sorry about the, er... You know. Just a precaution.’

Benny watched him for five minutes, carefully pulling apart one flower after another as he searched for the concealed bomb. Then she grabbed what was left of her bouquet and stuck it in a vase.

‘Get some sleep,’ she told Dent. ‘I’ve a feeling tomorrow’s going to be another action-filled day of excitement and intrigue.’

Dawn was breaking over the city by the time Frunt decided he had shaken them off. He was exhausted and hungry. He had skipped dinner, he remembered, nervous before the job. That was nothing to how he felt now, but his appetite had returned.

He walked wearily through the throng of street traders setting up their stalls, ignoring the calls to examine their overpriced wares. A woman carrying rolls of silk bumped into him, dropping several rolls, but he did not notice. They splashed into a muddy puddle, and the woman swore after him.

Frunt was almost there now. If he could make it through the market to the end of the street, then he would be at the ideal place to hide away for a while and get some breakfast. Then he could call in and sort things out.

‘We’ve got the ferry port covered,’ Powlo said. ‘And he hasn’t left the city so far as we can tell.’ They were standing in the drizzle on a street corner. People were crossing the road to avoid them.

‘What can you tell?’ Luggar asked. He had listened for five minutes to a catalogue of things that had not happened, and places the thief had not gone. He was bored with it.

‘We think he’s still in this area.’ Powlo jabbed a finger at his map. ‘Lost himself in the markets and back alleys as they started to get busy.’

‘So what have you done?’

Powlo’s gaunt face crumpled into a smile. ‘Fronz is the expert on tracking,’ he said, and nodded to a thin-faced weasel of a man to come over. He was holding the tracker device.

‘I’ve been examining the log,’ Fronz said as he held out the tracker for Luggar to see. ‘We think he’s this element here.’ He pointed out a red dot on the map display. ‘We’ve managed to verify his movements this far.’ The dot on the map moved quickly round the display, doubling back on itself on several occasions. Other dots were shadowy dark against the map. ‘But with so many heat images it’s difficult to track his progress after we lost him.’

Luggar took the device and glared at it. Then he glared at Fronz. ‘So this can tell you what we already know, but no more?’ he growled.

‘Er, well, yes. But if we can extrapolate from the topological behavioural pattern of -’

Fronz broke off as Luggar held up the device and clenched it in his large hand. He squeezed it tightly, and a warning chirp started to sound. It stopped as the device shattered. Shards of plastic and componentry fell from Luggar’s hand. ‘Useless thing,’ he said.

Luggar dropped the shattered remains of the casing. It landed in a puddle. Powlo and Fronz looked at it anxiously, as Luggar lowered his foot deliberately on the largest surviving fragment and ground it to pieces.

‘You say you lost him among the people?’ Luggar asked.

‘Yeah,’ Powlo said, still looking at the puddle.

‘Then ask them.’

‘What?’

‘Ask them. Describe the man, ask where he went. People saw him. People round here see everything. Tell them that any useful information gets rewarded.’

‘What if they lie?’ Fronz asked sheepishly. ‘To get a reward,’ he explained.

‘Any information that is not useful also gets rewarded.’ Luggar told him. ‘Explain that. Anyone not helping gets their head ripped off. Understand?’

‘Er, yes,’ Fronz said. Powlo nodded vigorously.

‘And that includes you lot,’ Luggar said. ‘You’ve got an hour.’

Despite being tired, Benny woke early. She woke with a pounding head and vague recollection that someone had sent her flowers. She also recalled having won free drinks at the bar, and wondered whether they had been worth it.

There was no sign of Dent. He was not in the lounge, and the door to his room was closed. She decided not to disturb him, and left a note on the table saying she had gone for breakfast. Her head was telling her quite forcefully that she was in need of the regenerative powers of orange juice. And the calming effect of coffee. And if she could get a decent bacon sandwich as well then she might, just might, begin to feel human again.

She was feeling better by the time she emerged from the lift into the coffee lounge that adjoined the restaurant. Her head was clearing, and she was thinking about the day ahead. She’d been a bit rough on poor Dent about his war stories. Today she would see how red in tooth and claw the Rim really was.

The coffee area was a platform on the second floor among lifts, a bank of escalators and the restaurant that occupied much of the rest of the floor. There was a polished steel railing round the edge of the area. Below was the open space of the hotel foyer and reception area. Easy chairs and the occasional small sofa in tasteful pastel shades were arranged round the coffee area.

Slumped in one of the easy chairs was a man. He was wearing a long, dirty coat, and he looked soaked through. His thinning hair was plastered to his head, and there was a soggy patch on the carpet round his feet. He was just waking up as Benny approached, and looked startled, scared and wary all at once.

Benny paused in front of the chair. 'Are you all right?' she asked.

The man looked back at her. He didn't seem so frightened now, but the wariness was still there.

Benny smiled. 'It's OK,' she said. 'I don't bite. Well, not often. Well, not people.'

The man smiled thinly, but made no comment. Instead he pulled himself wearily to his feet and stumbled away towards the escalators. He almost fell into Benny as he went, brushing against her. She took a step backwards, partly to avoid being knocked over, and partly recoiling from the smell. There was a real possibility, she thought as she watched him blunder against the steel guard rail, that he had spent much of the night sleeping in a rubbish bin. 'And a very good morning to you,' Benny called after him.

The man paused at the sound of her voice, turning to look back at Benny. He leant back against the rail as he watched her.

She smiled at him less than sweetly, then turned and made her way towards the restaurant and the smell of bacon that was beginning to exorcise the smell of the man.

The guns were loaded with anaesthetic darts. They wanted him alive, in case he had ditched it somewhere. Powlo and his team had worked their way through the market stalls one by one demanding information. Grudgingly, Powlo had to admit that Luggar's plan was yielding results. Before long they had established the direction in which the man had been heading. Several more enquiries and they were closing in. A woman selling rolls of mud-splashed silk was more than happy to point them along the street that led to the Xcelsior Hotel.

'Makes sense,' Luggar said when Powlo reported back to him. 'He would want to lose himself in the crowds. As people leave the hotel for the day, he could slip out with them.'

'Maybe he already has,' Powlo suggested, his cheeks blue with the cold as well as their normal discoloration.

'It's early yet,' Luggar said. 'Check the hotel.'

It was the first real piece of luck they'd had, Powlo reckoned as he entered the hotel foyer and happened to look up. There above him, walking along the mezzanine level close to the railing and perfectly visible, was the man. He was sure it was the man they had disturbed in the basement and then chased half across Virabilis.

Fronz looked where Powlo was pointing and nodded. 'That's him.'

Luggar was a few paces behind them. Powlo was determined that he rather than Luggar would make the capture. He wasn't about to screw this up or let Luggar take the credit for everything. This was his moment. With little thought for how anyone watching might react, he took out the gun and aimed.

He was half expecting someone in the hotel to see him, for there to be trouble. So, when Luggar shouted, Powlo paid no heed. The man he was aiming at had turned and now had his back to the railing. A large and easy target. He squeezed the trigger.

A moment later Luggar snatched the gun from his hand. 'Idiot,' he hissed.

The man made no sound. He was unconscious instantly. The shot had taken him in the small of the back, between the railings. The impact altered the man's position just enough to change his centre of gravity. Just enough for his upper body weight to lean back against the railings. Just enough for him to topple slowly, almost gracefully, backwards.

Powlo watched, vaguely aware that his mouth was hanging open, as the man fell. He smacked into the floor a few yards ahead of where Powlo and the others were standing. His eyes were closed, and there was a pool of blood already forming under his head.

Luggar recovered first. There was silence in the foyer. People were turning, watching, standing in surprise as the burly man pushed his way towards the body. 'It's all right,' he said loudly. 'I'm a doctor.'

Few people believed him. But everyone was happy to leave him to it.

Powlo joined Luggar by the body. He knelt down beside it, careful to avoid the mess.

'You're a crazy fool,' Luggar told him. 'You should think with your head, not your trigger finger.'

'We got him, didn't we?' Powlo grumbled.

Luggar was patting the body, pulling the lining out of the coat pockets as he searched. 'It wasn't him we were after,' he snapped.

Powlo could feel his stomach beginning to turn. 'He hasn't got it?'

Luggar stood up and brushed himself down. He straightened his jacket. 'He hasn't got it.' He pointed across the room to a hotel receptionist who was watching the proceedings nervously. 'You,' he shouted in a husky voice. 'Yes, you. Call the morgue. Get this thing collected, it's in the way.' Luggar turned to Powlo. 'And so are you,' he hissed. 'I'll have to explain what's happened to Mrs Winther now. You'd better find out exactly where he's been, and start looking.'

'Yes, Mr Luggar,' Powlo said quietly. 'I'll get on it right away.'

'Where he's been, who he's spoken to, everything,' Luggar said. 'Mrs Winther wants Dorpfeld's Prism. And what Mrs Winther wants, Mrs Winther gets.'

CHAPTER 6

Jason and Clarence watched the body being lifted on to a stretcher and carried away. They were standing at the edge of the coffee area so that they could see both the foyer and the part of the restaurant where Benny was working her way steadily through a large pot of coffee.

‘That was a close one,’ Jason said. He had watched the man topple backwards over the rails just as Benny turned away and walked obliviously into the restaurant.

Clarence had been keeping watch on the rooms, waiting for Dent Harper to emerge. ‘If I’d been here, I might have flown down and caught him,’ he said with a touch of regret.

Jason grunted. ‘That would have helped us stay inconspicuous.’

Further along, Dent was also watching as the body was removed. He was not especially surprised at events, having arrived in time only to see a body lying in a pool of blood on the floor. Hardly unusual. He clicked his tongue and shook his head.

Then, with the event dismissed from his mind, he wandered into the restaurant to look for Benny.

On his way he glanced at a strange pair who had also been watching the body being removed. One of them seemed to be sporting a false moustache. Both turned away as he glanced at them. Well, that was fine. Virabilis was full of people who did not care to be recognized. Dent was just glad he was not one of those people.

‘Morning,’ he pronounced cheerfully as he sat down opposite Benny.

‘Mmm,’ she said. ‘You’re bright and breezy today.’

Dent poured himself some juice. 'You have to get up extremely early in the morning to get the better of Dent Harper.'

'Is that so?' Benny asked. 'Well, for what it's worth, I've done six impossible things already this morning. And that includes getting the better of my hangover.' She poured herself more coffee. 'Almost.'

'If I'm suffering,' Dent said matter-of-factly, 'I just think back to the time I was held for three lunar months by the Gurbels.'

Benny stared at him. 'I can imagine that would be a sobering experience,' she said. 'Three months?' She blew out a long breath. 'Brings tears to your eyes.'

She had felt sadder than she expected as she watched the body of Miklos Frunt being carried away. There was no chance of her being associated with him, she was sure. Just another face in the crowd watching. Nevertheless, Linn Sekka was also feeling nervous.

When Frunt called in the night before, he had mentioned 'meeting as arranged'. The arrangement was that in the event of trouble he would be at the Xcelsior. Now she was not sure whether waiting till the agreed time had been a good thing, given that she was still alive, or a bad one, given that he was dead. If she had come earlier, would they have got away? Or would they have been ambushed?

She had arrived just as Frunt hit the hotel floor. That had given her something of a jolt, though nowhere near as much as it had evidently given him. She had hung back and watched the heavies frisk his body. And she had noted that they did not find what they were looking for. She was certain they would have done had it been there. But even so she took note of the company name on the side of the morgue truck that made the pick-up a few minutes later.

Then she went back into the hotel. While she had been watching, she had looked round, trying to spot all of the thugs who were responsible for poor Miklos's death. She recognized Rula Winther's bodyguard, Luggar. And she knew

his reputation. She wasn't surprised it was the Cartel that had taken out Miklos. What had surprised her, though, was a figure looking down into the foyer. She caught only a glimpse, but she was sure she recognized the man.

So she made her way to the reception desk and made enquiries.

'Yes, indeed.' The young receptionist seemed keen to share the secret, if it was a secret, with another young and impressionable woman. 'Dent Harper is working for a tour company as a guide. Can you believe it?' She raised her eyebrows and looked round as if to check nobody else had overheard her indiscretion. 'And his client is the famous archaeologist Berny Summerton.' She nodded, pursing her lips together.

'Never heard of him,' Linn said.

The receptionist frowned. 'Neither have I,' she admitted after a moment's consideration.

Jericko Klench was acutely aware of his shortcomings. And short was a good way to describe them. He was well below average height, but made up for it by having a larger than average girth. His head was balding in the middle in a way that was impossible to disguise by combing across what greasy lengths of dark hair were left. But he tried it anyway. His bulging, pale eyes were too sensitive to wear contact lenses, and the idea of laser surgery or lens implants quite frankly made him cringe and squirm. So instead he wore spectacles with thin steel frames and small, round, thick glass which made his eyes appear even more disproportionately big. His ears stuck out like satellite receiver dishes, and his neck was so short his shirt collar was crumpled. When he was nervous, he sweated. Lots. He was usually nervous.

But, while he knew he was in no great physical shape, his mind he was sure was quick and alert. If his eyes bulged it was surely with intelligence. If he was losing his hair, wasn't that a sign of virility and wit? If he was a little tubby, then

that was because he chose to work out mentally rather than in a gym.

In fact, the only regret he had about his appearance was that if he were just a bit taller, if he were just a touch slimmer, if he didn't have to wear his glasses quite all the time, if he were - oh sod it - a handsome brute with biceps and pecks rather than a short-arsed fatso, then perhaps (just perhaps) Linn might take a bit more interest in him.

Against that, however, he had to balance the excellent professional relationship he enjoyed with her. He just wished she seemed to enjoy it a bit more. She was a clever girl. She was intelligent enough to know not to judge by external appearances and to appreciate the inner self, the quality of the mind. Jericko was certain of that.

It was what kept him going. And it was how he justified what he was doing.

When she called from the Xcelsior, Jericko experienced the usual slight difficulty breathing. He could feel the tiny pinpricks of perspiration under his arms as he dabbed at his ample forehead with a damp handkerchief.

'Miklos is dead,' she said.

Jericko stopped dabbing. As soon as his mind was properly engaged, his gland problem seemed to go away. As soon as he forgot he was nervous, he was focused on the problem in hand.

'How?' he asked at once. 'Are we implicated?'

'The Cartel. I didn't see exactly, but he's dead. I don't think they know who he was with, who he was working for. Anything like that.'

Jericko breathed out heavily. 'That's something, anyway. We should be safe. And did they - ?'

'No,' she said quickly. 'He didn't have it on him. They're looking for it now, I guess.'

'They'll find it before we do,' Jericko said. 'They know where he went.'

There was a pause from the other end of the line. Then Linn said, 'Not necessarily. We might be able to get the drop on them.'

‘Oh?’

‘Guess who’s staying in the hotel.’

Jericko’s already high-pitched voice rose an octave to a shrill squeak. ‘Staying in the hotel? Are you mad? We have the chance to get our hands on one of the most underrated and misunderstood treasures -’

She cut him off again. ‘Dent Harper,’ she said. ‘And some archaeologist.’

‘I don’t care if it’s ...’ Jericko paused as he realized what she had said. ‘Dent Harper,’ he repeated.

‘That’s right. And some famous archaeologist.’ She gave him a moment to reply. When he didn’t she went on: ‘You know, archaeologist. As in “expert in old relics”. As in “finds stuff that’s lost”. Valuable stuff. You know?’

‘I know,’ Jericko said. ‘I’m thinking.’

‘Thinking?’ Linn said with a snort. ‘Dent Harper and this guy - the perfect team. If anyone can get to it before Winther’s thugs and fight for it if they have to, it’s these two. What’s there to think about?’

‘I’m thinking,’ Jericko said, ‘about what story we should make up for them.’

* * *

The heat was almost unbearable, and the mud was up to my knees. I had to brace my feet against the dead bodies of Chas and Ronan just to keep from falling down. If my hands had been free I might have tried climbing out, but from the length of time I spent falling when they pushed me in I reckoned it was seventy metres to the top. Straight up.’

‘Oh, I believe you,’ Benny said.

‘No, I mean...’ He broke off and grinned. ‘A joke,’ he realized. ‘I see.’

She smiled back.

‘Shall I go on?’

‘Do,’ she encouraged. ‘Just as soon as the lady with the hair has had a word.’

Dent frowned. ‘What?’ He turned to follow Benny’s line of sight. His view was blocked by the full chest of the young woman who was standing close behind him. He gave a short

exclamation of astonishment and leant back to look up at her. She looked to be in her late twenties, immaculately dressed in a sensible dark trouser suit with a white blouse.' She was pretty without being beautiful, a scattering of freckles across her nose. Her eyes were green and her hair was auburn. It hung very straight and very long, reaching almost to her waist.

'Excuse me,' the woman said, 'but aren't you -'

'Yeah,' Dent interrupted. 'I am.'

'I thought so.' She sat down without apparently being encouraged or embarrassed.

'Bernice Summerfield,' Benny said, holding out her hand. Dent glared at her.

'Ah,' the woman said. 'Would that be Bernie for short?'

'I hope not. Benny will do. And you are?'

The woman smiled. When she did, her whole face seemed to glow with happiness. 'Linn Sekka,' she said. 'I'm sorry to interrupt you both at breakfast -I know how busy you must be. Archaeology and all that.' She poured some juice into a spare glass. 'May I?'

'Oh, be our guest,' Dent said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

She seemed not to notice the tone. 'Thank you so much.'

Benny and Dent exchanged glances. 'So how can you help us?' Benny asked.

'I work for Mr Jericko Klensch, the antiques and curio dealer,' she said. She sipped at the juice, made a face, and put the glass carefully down. 'He sends his regards and wonders if you could possibly spare him some of your valuable time.'

'Well -' Dent started.

'He has lots of things he'd like to discuss,' Linn went on. 'Including just how valuable your time is at the moment.'

'Can we discuss this?' Benny asked.

'Of course.' Linn made no attempt to move. So Benny got up and gestured for Dent to follow her.

They stopped a short distance away and whispered to each other.

‘What do you think?’ Benny hissed. ‘Could be interesting?’

‘Interesting’s an understatement,’ Dent whispered back. ‘Klench is about the most unscrupulous businessman on the planet. He keeps legal, just. But if there’s any missing relic or stolen artefact from an ancient civilization you can bet he knows where it is even if he doesn’t actually have it himself. Anyone with any sense would run a mile from an offer to go round for tea and biscuits.’

Benny nodded. ‘Great,’ she said. ‘Just what we need. Let’s go and find out what the man’s offering.’

‘Are you crazy?’ Dent demanded.

Benny looked hurt. ‘Could be chocolate digestives,’ she said.

* * *

Benny enjoyed the short trip across town to Klench’s office. For the first time since she had arrived she was beginning to feel that there was some action in the city – something happening, something in which to get involved. She had no idea what it was. But the streets looked rougher this morning, the drizzle heavier, the look of the passers-by more suspicious.

By contrast, Dent seemed in a quiet mood. As Benny enthused about how great things had been, were and would be, Dent grunted in a noncommittal manner and made occasional comments about getting fingers burnt.

‘Oh, come on,’ Benny said at one point. ‘You’re the great adventurer, so where’s your sense of adventure?’

‘There’s some value in only planning to get involved in things you understand,’ Dent told her quietly. ‘Walk away from the things that feel wrong from the start. This feels wrong,’ he added.

Benny shrugged. ‘Let’s hear the guy out. Then we can decide. Hey, no commitments, right?’

‘Right,’ said Dent. With heavy emphasis.

Klench had a small shop in an office building down a side street in a quiet area of Virabilis. Linn Sekka let herself into the shop, which did not appear to be open to the buying

public, with a card-key and led Benny and Dent through to the back where there was a lift. It took a while as Benny paused at almost every step to gasp in amazement at the antiques and knick-knacks on display. Dent whistled at the prices.

As they waited for the lift, Benny dived off to the side to examine a vase standing on a plinth. 'I don't believe it,' she said out loud. 'This is a second-dynasty Hydrogoor with a glazed finish.' Her eyes were large as she lifted it very gently from its position and examined the base. 'These are very rare,' she told Dent as he joined her. 'Very rare indeed.'

'Probably a fake, then,' he said flatly.

'Oh, it's easy to tell,' Benny assured him. 'The genuine ones are incredibly strong and emit a perfect C-flat when you tap the lip of the opening on something.' She carefully lifted it up again. 'Here, like this.'

The embarrassed silence was broken by the sound of the lift arriving. Dent followed Benny in without a word.

Benny coughed. 'Sorry about that,' she muttered. 'Do you have someone who clears up?'

They went up to the sixth floor. Klensch was waiting outside the lift as the doors opened. Behind him, Benny could see a monitor showing images from a security camera in the shop below. Currently it was focused on a pile of shattered pottery. The room was not big, occupied mainly by a desk with chairs round it. A display case on one wall held various pieces that Benny knew would be priceless if genuine. It also prevented anyone from getting close enough to be able to verify if they were genuine. Behind the desk, a large picture window gave a view out over Virabilis and the rocky hills beyond.

There were brief introductions and shaking of hands. But further discussion was halted by a sudden shriek from Linn Sekka. Her hand went to her mouth and she blinked several times.

'Are you all right, my dear?' Klensch was immediately concerned.

She nodded. 'Sorry. Yes. I - I thought I saw...' She walked rapidly across the room and looked out of the window behind

the desk. After a moment she turned back to face them. 'I thought I saw a face at the window,' she said. Her voice was calm again now. 'Sorry, it must have been a reflection.'

Dent nodded sympathetically. 'Unless whoever you saw can fly,' he said brightly.

* * *

The ground car was parked in the alley beside the building. Next to it was a large rubbish skip. Litter was strewn down the pavement. Drizzle peppered the greasy windscreen.

'You placed the bug OK?' Jason asked as Clarence climbed into the car.

'I don't think anyone saw me,' Clarence said as he folded his wings away and pulled on his rucksack. 'It's at the edge of the window, the reverberation of the glass will -'

'Yes, I know,' Jason said. 'So what's happening?'

Clarence cocked his head to one side. 'Wait a moment while I tune in to the frequency. Ah, that's it.' He listened for a moment to the voices in his head. 'Nothing much. Welcome, nice to meet you, that sort of tiling.' He frowned. 'Ah,' he said.

There was silence for a few seconds. 'What did you mean, "Ah"?' Jason asked. "Ah" with no further explanation is not helpful. What's going on?'

'Oh,' said Clarence. He sucked in his cheeks. 'Ooh.'

Benny shook her head. 'Dorpfeld's Prism? Never heard of it.'

'It is not archaeologically important,' Klench admitted. 'More of a curio than an antique.'

Benny smiled. 'Like that Hydrogoor vase, then.'

The slight smile on Klench's own moist face faded at once. 'We can discuss how you intend to reimburse me for that later,' he said sharply. Then, as if he had switched it back on, the smile returned to his face. 'Although your help in this small matter would be more than adequate repayment, of course.'

Dent sighed loudly. He tapped his foot on the floor. He avoided looking at Benny.

'So what about this curio?' Benny asked quickly.

‘I would like your help in finding it. Or, rather, in recovering it.’

‘Why, has it been lost?’

Klench thought for a moment. ‘In a manner of speaking,’ he said at last.

‘Meaning what?’ Dent demanded. ‘If you think we’re going to steal some -’

‘Steal?’ Klench seemed scandalized. ‘Steal, Mr Harper? I should hope not indeed. In fact it is I who have been the victim of a theft. Or nearly so.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Yes,’ Klench insisted. ‘Dorpfeld’s Prism is in actual fact my property. I recently acquired the piece from a private collection. A courier was bringing it to me last night.’

‘So what happened?’ Benny asked. ‘Got lost?’

Klench opened his hands in front of him. ‘Got mugged,’ he said simply.

Benny looked at Dent. ‘Sounds more like your sort of thing than archaeology,’ she said.

‘I don’t think we’re going to be able to help you,’ Dent said to Klench.

‘Let me finish, please. Then you can decide.’ Klench raised an eyebrow and looked from Dent to Benny. ‘My unfortunate colleague who was bringing the curio here was attacked in the street.’ He shook his head. ‘Most unfortunate. Even in our quiet and usually safe neighbourhood such tragic events do indeed happen on occasion.’ He broke off for a moment in order to indulge in some serious tongue clicking and shaking of the head. ‘But,’ Klench went on after several moments of suitable sobriety, ‘I believe he did manage to hide the piece before he was caught by the despicable gang that was chasing him.’

‘And what happened to your unfortunate colleague?’ Dent asked.

Klench sighed, pursed his lips together, and shook his head sadly. From across the room Linn gave a small gasp and dabbed at her eyes with a hanky.

‘So how do you know all this?’ Benny asked.

Klench's recovery was as instant as his assistant's. He waved an index finger at Benny. 'An excellent question, my dear.'

'Half right,' Benny agreed. 'I'm not your "dear" but it is a good question.'

Klench made a high-pitched, nasal clicking sound that might have been laughter. 'He called me,' he said when he had finished the noise.

'What did he say? Did he give you any clues as to where he'd hidden the thing?'

Klench nodded to Linn. 'If you would be so kind,' he murmured.

Linn held up a small recorder and pressed a button moulded into the casing.

'Is that you?' Klench's nasal voice was clearly identifiable.

The voice of the man he was talking to was slightly less clear. 'Of course it's me. Who else would call you at this time?'

'Where are you?' Klench's voice asked.

'Right outside. But I can't come in. Listen, there's a problem. A big problem.' There was a pause, then the voice hissed, 'The Cartel are after me. They were there, at the building. I think they're after the relic.'

Klench smiled, as if delighted at the evidence of his concern as his voice said, 'Are you OK?'

The other man had obviously not been convinced. 'No, I'm not. They'll kill me if they find me. You know that.'

Klench's reply was surprisingly low as he said, 'Miklos, listen, I can't help you -'

Klench's expression changed to slight embarrassment as the other voice cut him off. 'I know that. And don't worry: I won't lead them to you.'

'I would if I could. If there was any way -' Across the room Klench shrugged as if to reaffirm his good intentions.

'Rubbish,' the other voice snapped.

'Well, there's no need to get Klench's voice said. At the same time, the real Klench put in, 'He was a little upset, understandably. But what could I do?'

'You're trash,' the voice hissed as Klench finished talking over himself. 'You hear that? Got to go. If I manage to get away, I'll meet you as arranged. If not... goodbye.'

There was a click as Linn turned off the recorder.

'So what's this Cartel, then?' Benny asked brightly.

It was Dent who answered. 'I don't think we want to get mixed up with them,' he said grimly. 'They control just about everything illegal here. And that means just about every form of business. An unpleasant lot, to say the least.'

Klench was less concerned. 'I doubt that you'll come up against them. Even if they were after Dorpfeld's Prism, they will have no idea where to look for it.'

Dent was not convinced. 'I'm not sure that's very reassuring. If they know you're involved, then they'll already know we've been here.'

Klench was shaking his head. 'There is no way they can know of my involvement,' he said with apparent confidence. 'Now, if I were to start hunting for the relic myself, they might put two and two together...'

'Another reason for enlisting your help,' Linn said.

Benny considered this. 'Tell us about the relic, then,' she said. 'What is Dorpfeld's Prism.'

'A bauble, no more,' Klench said. 'He gave his peculiar high-pitched wheeze of a laugh. 'But one for which I have paid a considerable sum. It has little intrinsic value.'

As he spoke, Linn dimmed the lights. A holo-image appeared in the air in the middle of the room. It revolved slowly so that they could see it from every side. It showed a necklace resting inside a display case. A large clear stone was set in a silver mounting attached to the chain of the necklace. The stone had been cut so that it was multifaceted. The light source when the image was created made it seem to glow with inner fire.

'Pretty,' Benny commented. 'What's so special about it?'

'Nothing,' Klench said. He said it just too quickly. Both Benny and Dent picked up on it and looked at him.

Klench shrugged. 'It's cursed, that's all.'

Dent laughed. 'Cursed? Great. The Cartel's going to be chasing us down for a cursed relic that has no intrinsic value.' He turned to Benny. 'Is it just me, or are we on to a loser here?'

'Who says it's cursed?' Benny asked. 'And what form does this curse take?'

'Oh I doubt that there's anything in it,' Klensch reassured them. 'The crystal is a relic of some ancient civilization.' He smiled thinly. 'You know the sort of thing, I'm sure.'

'Oh yes,' Benny told him. 'I'm sure I do.'

'There are various stories. The most common is that the necklace was found by Andreas Dorpfeld, a great explorer of his time.'

'And that time was?' Dent asked.

'Several hundred years ago. Records are vague. The war, you know.'

'And the curse?' Benny prompted.

'Seems to stem from the fact that after its discovery, Dorpfeld rather went to pieces. He was never the same again apparently. Seemed unable to keep a grip on reality. If you ask me, that sounds more like any typical eccentric explorer coming to the end of his already dangerously frayed tether.' His smile faded as he realized what he had said. 'Present company excluded, of course,' he mumbled in Dent's direction. He went on quickly, 'When Dorpfeld was dying, he gave the necklace to one of his colleagues, who asked him what the necklace was. He said, "My prism." Hence the name.'

'So,' Benny said slowly, 'if you possess this relic, you lose your grip on reality. Is that it?'

'It's just a story,' Dent said. 'An old archaeologist's tale. Superstition and nonsense. Even Klensch here doesn't believe it, do you?'

'Of course not,' Klensch said with a nasal snort of mirth.

As he spoke, Linn handed Benny a bag. It was a plain, grey drawstring bag made of what looked like a plastic material. Benny took it, puzzled. And nearly dropped it. 'That's heavy,' she said in surprise.

‘It’s lead-lined,’ Linn said. ‘A molecular coating on the interior.’

‘To put the necklace in when you find it,’ Klench said in response to Benny’s puzzled look. ‘The curse is apparently to do with close contact to the necklace. It affects the wearer. Anyone who touches it.’

‘I see.’ Benny examined the bag. ‘And that would be the curse that you don’t believe in?’ She nodded slowly. ‘Just checking.’

Klench’s voice was lower than usual, and surprisingly quiet when he replied. ‘Just because we don’t choose to believe in it, it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t take precautions. I pride myself on looking after those in my employ.’ He smiled across at Linn as he spoke. But she was busily inspecting her nails, and did not notice.

‘So, we’re in your employ, are we?’ Benny asked.

Klench’s head turned so that he was looking directly at the security monitor. It still showed the shattered remains of the vase in the shop below. ‘My employ or my debt,’ he said. ‘The choice is entirely yours.’ He smiled again. ‘I offer a good daily rate,’ he said.

After he had made his offer, Dent and Benny looked at each other. ‘That’s the first thing we agree on, I think,’ Dent said to Klench. ‘It’s an excellent rate. Especially for recovering a near-worthless trinket with no personal risk involved.’

‘Three days in advance,’ Klench said by way of reply.

‘We’ll need some out-of-pocket expenses too,’ Benny said. ‘And you should know that, speaking for myself, I have very big pockets.’

‘They’re leaving now,’ Clarence reported. He had been keeping Jason up to date on the discussions in Klench’s office.

‘About time too. Keep your head down.’

‘Maybe things will get easier now,’ Clarence said. ‘If Benny’s busy looking for this worthless trinket.’

Jason coughed. ‘I doubt that it’s either worthless or a trinket,’ he said. ‘She’s too trusting, that’s her problem. I

think things just got more difficult. She's going to be chasing round all over this godforsaken place looking for a priceless antique that has some sort of curse attached to it, with the Cartel hot on her heels.'

'Do you think we need a plan?'

'I think we need help.' Jason thought for a moment. 'We need to follow them when they come out. And we need to find out more about this Dorpfeld's Prism. And the Cartel. And Klench and what he's really up to.'

'And we need to make sure Benny stays safe and bored,' Clarence added.

Jason sighed. 'And in the afternoons we can take time off to visit the local psychiatrist.' He edged the vehicle forward so that it was nosing out into the main street. They could see the front of Klench's building, and as they watched Benny and Harper emerged. 'Right,' Jason said, 'we'll follow them for a bit. Then we shall probably need to split up. One of us keeps tabs on Benny while the other does some research.'

Clarence was staring into space. 'Klench and Linn are talking,' he said. 'I'll keep monitoring for as long as we stay within range of the transmitter.'

'Good. That might tell us something at least.'

* * *

'So where do we start?' Dent asked.

'Now that we have some cash,' Benny said, 'we continue as planned. I think it's essential to our quest that I get acquainted with the local environment. We'll worry about Dorpfeld's Prism tomorrow.'

Dent nodded. 'Good plan. If the Cartel are after it that'll give them time to get there first and save us the trouble and our necks.'

Klench watched Linn as she poured the coffee. He could watch her all day. Often he did. She didn't seem to mind. In fact, she didn't seem to notice.

'Do you think they'll find it?' she asked as she handed him a mug.

Klench shrugged. 'They are experts at finding things. That gives us an edge over Mrs Winther and her illiterate thugs. But they won't give up. They know the value of Dorpfeld's Prism, the same as we do. From the same source.'

'And what is its value?' she asked.

Klench said nothing. He was sipping his coffee. He was thinking about how things would be, when he had Dorpfeld's Prism. When everything came right. When his life was complete. 'They'll find it,' he said. 'I'm sure they will.'

Linn nodded. 'If they live long enough,' she said. 'If we live long enough, come to that.'

Klench frowned. 'There's nothing to connect Frunt to us,' he said. 'Nothing concrete anyway.'

'The Cartel doesn't need anything concrete,' Linn said. 'Except to bury people in. What if they trace the call Frunt made? Trace it back to us?'

Klench shrugged. 'Unlikely.'

'What if he has your number programmed into his comm?'

Klench shook his head. 'Hardly surprising, we've done business before.' But there was a note of worry in his voice now.

'What if they get his brain, and it remembers us.'

Klench leapt to his feet. Coffee slopped over his shirt, but he did not notice. 'Do you think it might?' His voice was a squeak of anxiety.

Linn shrugged. 'There's only one way to make sure it doesn't.'

Klench put down what was left of his coffee. He rubbed his chins. 'I don't suppose we could get Harper and Summerfield -' he began.

'No we couldn't,' Linn said abruptly. 'Just asking would put them off helping us at all. And if we go to anyone else we spread the thing wider, provide more ways the Cartel can trace us.' She sighed. 'I think we have to do this ourselves.'

Klench dabbed at his brow with a desperate handkerchief. 'Ourselves? You mean, us?'

She patted his shoulder, almost tenderly. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'I'll look after you.'

CHAPTER 7

The stalls and tables spilt out from the shops at street level so that the street was reduced to a narrow passageway between them. There was just about enough room for the people to push past each other as they moved from one trader to the next.

Benny insisted on stopping at every other stall and examining everything in sight, haggling over prices, pointing out mistakes in spelling and grammatical errors in the labels, then moving on without buying anything. Everything about Harper's body language seemed to suggest he was finding this tedious. But Jason was pleased with the situation, as it meant it was easy to keep Benny within sight without being seen himself.

As they followed Benny, Jason and Clarence talked. Or, rather, Jason did most of the talking.

'We have several options,' he said counting them off on his fingers. 'First, we need to keep Benny within sight for obvious reasons.' In the distance Jason could see rapid movement between the stalls. He peered through the crowds, trying to make it out as he spoke. 'Second, it would be useful to know more about this Dorpfeld's Prism thing. Not sure how we can find out.' The movement was getting closer. Jason could see now that it was someone on power blades. A young man. Unshaven and grubby. Pushing his way through the thronging people in the market.

'We could ask Braxiatel,' Clarence suggested. 'If he doesn't know, chances are he can find out for us.'

'Good thought,' Jason said. He had just seen the power-blader grab a bag from a young woman. He followed up the snatch with an especially rude and unpleasant gesture with his free hand. Then he scooped something off a stall. Jason

could hear the trader shouting abuse in ineffective response. 'We'll give him a call from the hotel.'

Jason paused at a stall. It sold interesting-looking polished stones and turned wood. He picked out a pale egg-shaped stone with a blue marble effect shot through it. It was incredibly smooth. The trader told him the price and Jason grimaced as he tossed a few coins to the man.

'Three,' he said as he watched the power-blader closing in on Benny and Harper. They didn't seem to have noticed him as he glided through gaps in the crowd, pushing aside anyone who got in his way. 'We should find out what this Cartel is up to. Maybe infiltrate it somehow.'

Jason paused for a moment as he drew back his arm. He took careful aim, then flung the egg-shaped stone in a high arc above the crowd in front. An old woman glared, and Jason smiled back.

'You can't do that,' Clarence said shaking his head.

'Oh?'

The stone caught the power-blader on the forehead as it arced down. He disappeared behind a group of people. For a brief moment a pair of power-bladed feet appeared above the group, then they too were gone.

'No,' Clarence went on. 'If you say "first", then "second", you have to say "third". You said "three".'

Jason looked at Clarence carefully, examining him for any evidence of intentional sarcasm. 'Are you sure you're not distantly related to Benny?' he asked. 'At all?'

They walked on in silence for a while before Jason said, 'So, what I suggest is this. You keep following Benny. I assume you've got the idea now about how to keep her out of trouble?' He stepped over the prone body of a grubby-looking man in bare feet. The marks left by the straps of the power blades before they had been quickly and forcibly removed were obvious pale lines through the grime.

'I think so,' Clarence said. 'Excuse me.' He reached past Jason to retrieve a local fruit from a startled thief. 'Seems easy enough.' He tossed the fruit back to the man behind the stall, who caught it in surprise.

‘Good. Then I’ll get on to Brax and see what he can come up with.’

‘And then?’

‘Oh after that I’ll infiltrate the Cartel and discover their plans, lead them away from Benny, and meet you for drinks at the hotel pub. You just keep after Benny and her chum.’ He slapped Clarence jovially on the rucksack. ‘Sound all right to you?’

‘I suppose so,’ the angel agreed. ‘But why do you get all the easy jobs?’

They had agreed that the rooms should be booked in false names, and the only quibble that Jason really had with the arrangements was that if Benny checked she might find it odd that there was a John Doe booked into the room next to Mr Fred Bloggs. Nobody else, of course, would see anything significant in the unusual names.

Since Braxiatel had made the hotel reservations and was paying the bills, Jason had no qualms about calling him up on an encrypted supralight microwave link. The only problem being, of course, that such a thing had not been invented yet. At least, not by any race that supplied technology to the Xcelsior. For Braxiatel this had been a minor problem, and he had supplied Jason with a small, thin disc to clamp over the standard satellite relay box in the hotel room. Jason was not sure whether he was more impressed with the fact that the disc converted a standard transmission into a faster-than light wave without the relay satellites noticing, or by the fact that the technology to do it was so small and bland. He settled for just being impressed.

There was a delay of about five seconds while the conversation was transmitted. This took a bit of getting used to, and they both found themselves talking over each other, and then saying sorry over each other. And then apologizing about it and offering to let each other speak first. Then waiting for ages in silence before talking over each other again, and so on.

Once they had mastered the technique, however, the conversation proved instructive. While they talked, Braxiatel was able to check several large databases of archaeological and historical information to which he just happened to have privileged access.

‘Right,’ he told Jason, ‘I’ve got a few references here. From the access logs I’d guess that your friend Klensch got his information from the same source. Probably tipped off by someone working for a certain Mrs Winther, who has also looked through it. Who tipped her off is anyone’s guess though.’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Jason said. ‘The important thing is that we find out -’

‘But I’d guess it was...’ Braxiatel went on, oblivious to Jason’s comments. He paused. ‘Sorry,’ he said.

There was silence for a while.

‘So what can you tell me?’ Jason asked.

‘I’ll tell you what I can,’ Braxiatel said. ‘Dorpfeld’s Prism seems to be - I’m telling you now, what’s the point... Sorry. Just got that.’ There was another pause. Then Braxiatel continued. ‘It’s old. Very old. And Klensch is right: it has little intrinsic value. But it does have a rather chequered history. Currently it is owned by a mining company that has its head offices registered on Virabilis, but from the insurance data I don’t think they can know what they have. Or had, rather, given what you’ve told me. They probably don’t even know they’ve lost it. And, if they do, I don’t think they care. They haven’t filed a claim.’

‘So, what is it?’ Jason asked. ‘Sorry, you’ll get that in a minute.’

‘They just think it’s old and curious,’ Braxiatel was saying. In fact there’s a bit more to it than -’ He paused. ‘That’s all right. Anyway, it seems from putting a few references together that Dorpfeld’s Prism is actually a relic of the Smermashi civilization. Once you know that, the curse thing becomes rather more interesting.’

‘Oh?’

'You probably don't know, but the Smermashi developed a technology that enabled them to improve reality. Oh yes... Sorry, that was from earlier, wasn't it? It didn't really improve reality. It just made things seem better than they really are. Something to do with modulating the alpha and beta waves of anyone in direct contact with the focusing stone. It's trivial stuff actually. Like putting on metaphorical rose-tinted spectacles. The sun seems brighter, the weather warmer, there's a pleasant scent on the breeze and everyone is happier with their lot in general. But as an approach to life...'

'Sounds like a good thing,' Jason said.

'It's terrifying,' Braxiatel finished.

'You're right,' they both said.

'What happened to these Smermashi?' Jason asked when he thought it was safe to speak.

There was a pause before Braxiatel answered. 'They died out, of course. There were all sorts of minor environmental difficulties on their world. Ozone-layer depletion, pollution, mad-dodontorus disease, that sort of thing. But they just didn't realize. They thought everything was hunky dory and ignored it all.'

Jason thought about this. 'Sounds like what happened to Dorpfeld,' he said at last. 'Klench said he lost his grip on reality. Went mad.'

'We all need to keep a grip on reality,' Braxiatel said. 'A healthy dose of the real world is essential.'

'We'd better find this thing,' Jason said seriously. 'I have a plan.'

'I think you'd better find this thing, Braxiatel said grimly. 'Do you have a plan?'

'But I'll need your help,' Jason admitted.

'Good,' Braxiatel said. 'Can I help?'

He let her rant and rave for several minutes. Just stood there and took it. She would calm down eventually, he knew. She always did.

'I'm sorry,' she said at last. She sighed and smiled slightly. 'I know it's not your fault, Luggar. You did what you could.'

‘Thank you, Mrs Winther.’

‘But thanks to Powlo and those other idiots we do now have a problem.’

‘Yes, Mrs Winther;

She stopped pacing up and down and sat behind her desk. ‘What do you suggest?’

‘Powlo and his team are retracing the man’s movements, searching everywhere. We’re trying to find out what we can about the man. His name was Miklos Frunt, a petty crook from a good background. Family had money, way back. It didn’t get as far as Frunt though.’

Rula Winther tapped her fingers on the top of the desk. ‘We’re relying too much on luck,’ she said slowly. ‘We need more to work from.’ She looked up at Luggar. ‘How did he die?’

‘He fell,’ Luggar said. ‘Powlo shot him with a sleep dart. He was on a raised floor level, and fell over the edge.’

‘Was his head damaged?’

Luggar considered. ‘No more than you’d expect, Mrs Winther. I didn’t look too close. He was dead.’

Mrs Winther sat back in her chair. ‘I wonder’, she said, whether we might get a nascent image.’ She nodded to herself. ‘Yes, it might be possible. Get me Doctor Creer. And find out where the body has been taken.’

‘Yes, Mrs Winther.’

When Luggar made no effort to leave, she asked him, ‘Is there something else?’

Luggar shuffled uneasily. ‘Yes, Mrs Winther. I don’t know how they knew we might be interested, but there’s a professor from some place here to see you.’

‘Oh?’ She frowned, annoyed at the distraction.

‘Some sort of expert in Dorpfeld’s Prism, they say.’

A few minutes later, Luggar showed in the professor.

‘Thank you, Luggar.’ Mrs Winther patted his hand. ‘Stay with us while we talk, won’t you?’

‘Yes, Mrs Winther. Doctor Creer is on his way over from the city. Should be here soon.’

Mrs Winther motioned for the professor to stand in front of her desk. Luggar remained standing by the door, hands clasped in front of him.

‘It is very good of you to see me, Mrs Winther,’ the professor said. ‘I think I can be of considerable help to you.’

‘We shall see.’ She smiled. ‘Those who are of help to me are rewarded handsomely.’ She leant forward, the smile freezing. ‘As are those who waste my time.’

‘I quite understand.’

‘Good.’ Mrs Winther examined the professor for a few moments. ‘You’re not what I imagined an expert on ancient relics to look like.’

‘Appearances can be deceptive, ma’am.’

‘Let’s hope so.’

The professor was young, perhaps in his mid-thirties. He was dressed in heavy boots, grubby slacks and a heavy denim shirt that was rather creased. He was a tall man, with a mess of hair that looked as though it had once met a comb But not recently. But, for all his apparent lack of care in his appearance, there was an attractive quality about him. His smile was especially engaging. He fiddled with his left ear as he spoke, perhaps a nervous gesture.

‘Let me introduce myself,’ he said. ‘I am Professor Fred Bloggs from the Archaeology Department of St Oscar’s University on Dellah. Until recently, that is. I’m on a sabbatical at the moment.’ He paused before adding. ‘Researching a relic that I believe is of interest to us both.’

‘Dorpfeld’s Prism,’ Mrs Winther said.

‘Exactly.’

‘What a happy coincidence,’ Mrs Winther said. ‘Let us hope.’

The professor grinned back at her.

‘You won’t mind if I ask you a few questions about the Prism, will you?’ Mrs Winther asked, her tone dangerously reasonable. ‘Partly to satisfy my own curiosity on certain points, and partly of course to evaluate your credentials.’

The professor fumbled with his ear again. ‘Not at all, not at all. Very wise, if I may say so.’

‘First of all, then, a brief summary of the relic’s history.’

Professor Bloggs nodded. ‘Without going into unnecessary detail,’ he said, ‘the relic known as Dorpfeld’s Prism was originally created by the Schemoozi as a focus point for a technology -’

‘The Schemoozi?’ Mrs Winther interrupted. ‘You mean the Smermashi, don’t you?’ Her eyes flashed dangerously as they caught the light.

But the professor seemed unimpressed. He waved a hand in the air. ‘If you prefer, Smermashi,’ he said. ‘I was using their own local pronunciation as detailed by Chris Cwej in his excellent analysis of their culture.’

The fire in her eyes subsided and Mrs Winther nodded. ‘I see. Go on.’

‘Oh nice one,’ said the voice in Jason’s ear. ‘If you’re not sure, wait for me to tell you.’

It had taken Jason a couple of hours to find a market stall selling the standard communications components he needed. Then, following reassuringly precise and clear directions Braxiatel had given him, Jason tried to assemble a tiny supralight communication device built round the faster-than-light disc. There seemed to have been some translation problems relating to the way that Braxiatel’s instructions had been captured in Jason’s hurried, scrawled and ambiguous notes, but eventually he reckoned he had succeeded.

Finding a small but sufficiently powerful battery had been the biggest problem. In the hotel, the disc drew power from the communications system itself. Now it would be a constant and heavy drain on whatever power supply Jason used for the rest of the communications device. He was not sure how long the battery he had eventually managed to obtain would hold out. The bulk of the device was in his trouser pocket, radio-linked to a tiny ear-speaker that kept getting dislodged. He pushed it back into place, trying to make it look as if he was just rubbing his ear.

The main problem was again the time delay. Braxiatel could hear what they were saying, and prompt Jason. But

the conversation took five seconds to get to Braxiatel, and his answer then took another five seconds to get back. That was if he said something immediately. So Jason had to buy time before saying anything.

‘And when did Dorpfeld find the Prism?’ Mrs Winther was asking.

‘Ah, excellent question.’ Jason nodded enthusiastically. ‘Of course there is some disagreement as to which sources’ are accurate, but most are agreed on the year. Now did you want the year of his expedition, or when he actually found, I mean discovered as it were, the actual Prism?’

‘Is there a difference?’ Mrs Winther asked. She was looking at him suspiciously.

‘Twenty-three fifteen,’ Braxiatel’s voice said in Jason’s ear.

‘No matter,’ Jason said quickly. ‘It was twenty-three fifteen in any case, as I think you know.’ He wagged his finger at her, as if in admonishment. She did not seem to appreciate the gesture. He stuck it back in his ear.

‘And what did Dorpfeld initially think he had found?’ she asked. ‘When he first discovered the Prism, I mean.’

‘Ah,’ Jason said. ‘An interesting question again. So many interesting questions in fact. Very good. Yes.’ He nodded for a while as if considering. ‘Is this one you already know the answer to, or are you genuinely curious?’ he hazarded.

‘Just answer the question.’

‘Right. Yes, of course.’ That should be about long enough. Jason held his breath, and almost sighed in relief as he heard Braxiatel’s voice.

But the voice said, ‘Hang on, I’ll have to look that up. Might take a minute or two.’

‘A minute or two?’ Jason said out loud. He tried to turn the words into a cough, but failed. ‘Excuse me,’ he said. ‘A minute or two was all that Dorpfeld needed to uncover the relic when he found it. And of course his first question was: what was it that he had found? The same question you just asked of me, of course. In fact. And which I am now answering.’ Mrs Winther didn’t look convinced.

‘A piece of gear linkage from a space hopper?’ Braxiatel’s voice said in surprise. ‘He must have been mad.’

‘A piece of gear linkage from a space hopper,’ Jason said confidently. ‘He must have been mad.’

Mrs Winther stared at him.

‘Probably just saw the chain before he unearthed it,’ Braxiatel’s voice said.

‘My own theory,’ Jason confided, looking round as if to check they were not being overheard, ‘is that he uncovered the chain first, and based his initial supposition on that. The relic in its entirety would obviously not be mistaken for gear linkage.’ He crossed his fingers behind his back. Then, realizing that Luggar was standing behind him, he uncrossed them again.

Mrs Winther was rising to her feet, emerging from behind the desk like a huge octopus pulling itself out of the water. ‘Professor Bloggs,’ she said seriously.

‘Er, yes,’ Jason replied. He coughed his voice lower again. ‘Yes,’ he repeated in a more masculine and assured tone.

‘I’ve wondered how Dorpfeld could have come to such a conclusion.’ She was smiling, coming round the desk to shake his hand. ‘Your theory is of course most plausible. A sensible explanation. And so obvious.’ She nodded enthusiastically. ‘You know, Luggar, I think that Professor Bloggs could be of great value to us. Certainly once we have retrieved the relic.’

Before Luggar could answer, if indeed he was going to, there was a bleep from the comm unit on Mrs Winther’s desk. The voice that spoke was female, slightly husky. ‘Mrs Winther, Doctor Creer has arrived.’

‘Send him in.’

Jason took a step away from the desk. But she held up her hand to stop him. ‘No, Professor, you can wait while I have a brief word with the good doctor.’

The good doctor turned out to be thin to the point of emaciation with small dark eyes, short blond hair and an apparent inability to smile.

‘I understand you have a candidate for nascent imaging,’ he said to Mrs Winther. His voice was clipped and his words precisely articulated, as if he were speaking a foreign language. ‘I should point out that the process is still very much in the early stages of development. A clear imaging solution is, alas, not always possible.’

‘I understand that,’ Mrs Winther said with some impatience.

Doctor Creer continued as if she had not spoken, and Jason could see that she was bottling up her annoyance.

‘Whether the process is successful will depend on the state of the deceased. In particular the head, and neural ganglia. Also, the time and manner of death is important, and the state of mind of the victim in the dying moments. But we shall do what we can.’

‘Good.’

‘The body is... here?’ the doctor asked, clasping his skeletal hands together as if in prayer.

Mrs Winther looked to Luggar for an answer.

‘It’s in a crypt,’ he said. ‘Seems the... gentleman’s family owned a mausoleum on Benringer Heights.’

Creer was astounded. He gaped and gawped to the point that Jason had trouble keeping from laughing. ‘You do not have the body under proper medical supervision?’ he asked eventually. ‘No nutrient tank, oxygenation, rigor-mortis retarder?’

‘Oh please,’ Jason said before Mrs Winther could answer. ‘Who do you think you’re dealing with here? You’ll be quibbling over the legality of it all next.’ He tutted loudly and sat himself down in a chair.

Creer stared at him for a moment. ‘No legal waiver or consent agreement?’ His voice was quavering slightly. Nobody answered. ‘I may have to -’

‘Have to what?’ Luggar interrupted, cracking his knuckles like gunshots.

‘Have to, er, impose a slight surcharge for working under less than ideal conditions.’

‘I think you’ll find that the remuneration is more than sufficient,’ Mrs Winther said coldly. ‘But bear in mind that I reward results. Positive results.’

Doctor Creer returned her hard gaze. He seemed to have recovered something of his composure. ‘Then I suggest we make a start as soon as possible,’ he said. ‘I brought a portable system with me. All I need now is the organic input repository.’

‘And what’s that in layman’s terms?’ Jason asked.

Creer, Rula Winther and Luggar all turned to look at him. They looked at him for a long time. Long enough for Braxiatel to tell him the answer over the supralight link.

‘His brain. They want to see if they can resurrect the dead man’s final memories.’

Jason smiled. ‘His brain,’ he said with a nonchalance he did not feel. ‘I knew that.’ He swallowed as with a fizzing sound the battery in the supralight link died. ‘Just kidding.’

CHAPTER 8

‘So,’ Jason concluded, ‘I shook off the two goons they had tailing me when I left, and came to find you. Meanwhile, the less than delightful Mrs Winther has sent her minions off to find the guy’s brain.’

They were sitting in a corner of the hotel restaurant. Clarence was listening to Jason’s account of the day and watching him eat. Benny had turned in early for the night, worn out from the day’s hard shopping and intensive tourism as well as belated fatigue from her journey. Dent Harper was entertaining a growing crowd in the pub area with tales of his exploits. Jason and Clarence were both glad of a break.

Clarence had already told Jason about how his day had been. The way he described it sounded ordinary enough, but it had been an effort to stay one jump ahead of the street thieves and muggers, and to engineer a couple of road closures to keep Benny from stumbling upon the after effects of a gangland killing spree and a drive-by shooting.

Fortunately, Clarence told Jason, word seemed to be getting around the criminal fraternity and the underground that Benny and Dent were not good targets for any form of illicit activity. By the end of the day, Clarence had seen several people cross the street to avoid Benny, and a couple of stallholders pack away their fake designer wares, hastily correct the spelling on their hand-scrawled notices, and then take the rest of the day off rather than risk selling anything dodgy to her.

‘Anyway, first thing in the morning,’ Jason said as he chewed on a mouthful of food, ‘I’ll get back out to the villa and see what their brain-scan thing shows. If anything. Just in case. Try to make sure it’s nothing of any use.’

‘And I shall continue to look out for Benny,’ Clarence said without enthusiasm.

‘You got it.’ Jason grinned. ‘Hey, you just told me it was getting easier.’

Clarence did not grin back. ‘Have you any concept of relativity?’ he asked.

When Virabilis was first settled and land was cheap, several developers bought up huge parcels of real estate. One of these had been Vaclev Benringer. But the foresight of these pioneering individuals had been met with a certain lack of appreciation by the first governing bodies, and a land tax had been seen to it that most of them were bankrupted by the very investment they had every right to assume would make them rich.

Benringer was the exception. He found the loophole. That loophole was that consecrated ground was exempt. The result of this was that many people and businesses found that they were now paying rent not to Benringer and his company, but to a church they had never heard of. Pretty soon they were paying rent to another church they had never heard of, as Benringer sold off his assets before the loophole was closed. And closed it was. With the result that many of these secondary ecclesiastical foundations were forced also to close and cede their lands to the local authorities.

The loophole Benringer exploited this time was that the tax relief on consecrated ground was deemed to apply only to land that was used for legitimately religious purposes. The intention was that this would put paid to Benringer’s various schemes and scams and put him out of business.

In fact it was the making of him. Within a few years, the Benringer Cemetery Foundation (in association with Mortuaries for the Masses) was a hugely successful concern. Its business was fuelled by the spiralling murder rate, and various tax breaks meant that cheap burials and grave plots were an attractive commodity in the door-to-door salesman’s portfolio.

One of the more prestigious burial areas on Virabilis was Benringer Heights. It was a huge area of rocky hillside peppered with burial mounds and crumbling mausolea. In

the dark, picking your way along a narrow track overgrown with weed grass and stumbling round the rocks and over the hillocks, it was not an attractive place to be. This was an observation not lost on Nikole Medak as she followed Powlo and Fronz up the steep hillside towards a ruined building.

The moons were hidden behind a smog of pollution and cloud. The planet above was in shadow, and the pinprick lights of civilization on its lower surface were pretty but not illuminating. So they were relying on Powlo's torch.

They seemed to have been walking for hours. Even if she had agreed with Mrs Winther's suggestion that being involved in this clandestine mission would be instructive, Nikole would have been at the end of her tether by now. As it was she was seething.

'How much further?' she demanded of Powlo's back.

She got an indistinct grunt for a reply.

'I think she's losing it,' Nikole grumbled. 'Having us chase round in the dark after a brain. I ask you. Whatever happened to the good old days of smash 'n' grab, drugs and prostitutes? The old stand-bys of violence and robbery? This modern stuff...' She waited to see if her words had any effect, whether they struck a chord.

'She's desperate to get this Dor-thing, whatever it is,' Fronz said, by way of explanation.

'I know. I know. But do you know what it is? I mean, what it *really* is?'

'Look,' Powlo growled, 'if she wants it, we get it.'

They stumbled on up the track in silence for a while.

'All right, what is it, then?' Fronz asked.

'Nothing,' Nikole said. 'That's what it is. Nothing at all. Worthless. Just a bauble. A fad. An obsession. She's got us chasing round for nothing of value at all.' She paused to see if Powlo objected to her words. There was silence. So she went on: 'Yet she seems to value the thing more than she does us. I tell you, she's losing it.' She bit her lip, before adding, slightly more quietly so they could always pretend they had not heard, 'Someone should do something about it. Before it goes too far.'

Powlo stopped abruptly. Nikole braced herself, ready to run if need be. She could always claim she was upset by being sent out in the middle of the night with a couple of cretins who had totally misunderstood what she was saying. If she could run fast enough.

Powlo turned. But his expression was thoughtful. Or as close as it got. 'Be careful who you say that stuff to,' he said. Then, before she could comment, he pointed ahead.

Nikole and Fronz both leant forward to try to see where he was pointing. Ahead of them was a building. It was constructed of stone and had been grafted on to the side of one of the huge rocks that jutted out of the broken landscape. It was dark and forbidding, the central tower a foreshortened ruin. What light there was in the sky shone through a broken window high in the wall facing them.

'That's where we're going,' Powlo said.

The atmosphere in the pub seemed rather different from the previous night. Dent had seen three serious fights, one of which ended in two of the participants being carried out with bits of glass lodged in places where glass was never designed to be, and there had been any number of less enthusiastic arguments and contretemps. This was, Dent decided, more like it.

He signed a few final autographs, pushed aside a large bald man who fancied himself and had taken a swipe at Dent, and excused himself for the night. Tomorrow might be a long day, especially if they were to get on with some serious relic recovery.

With his mind on the task ahead, Dent made his weary way out of the pub and through the hotel foyer. He paused to trip up a lout who had lifted an old lady's bag as she waited at the reception desk, and yawned. There were sirens and flashing lights outside. Looked like three bodies laid out on the pavement outside the hotel door.

Yes, he needed his sleep.

Never one to stand on formality, when he found the door was locked Powlo kicked it down. Fortunately the heavy wood was rotted and brittle and gave way easily. He shouldered aside what was left of the door and squeezed himself into the cold, stone building.

There was not much that Powlo Vertutes believed himself to be above, but grave robbing was close to the point. He had listened to what Nikole said on the way, though he wasn't yet ready to commit himself to anything. But he resented the way Luggar had been sent to take over the search for the thief. An old man who had had his day. Out of touch with the way things were done now. Good only for watching an old lady's back, not for the sharp-end work, not for the streets, not for the real job of keeping the Cartel going. Yet that old man and the old lady had made it clear to Powlo that this ridiculous errand was his chance to redeem himself.

As if he needed to.

What was there to redeem?

And it was hardly a challenge. Even then they had sent a young woman along apparently to make sure he was up to it. And she said it was all for nothing anyway. Powlo felt annoyed, confused, insulted, aggrieved and rebellious. But not to the point where he would admit it. Not yet.

The beam from the torch picked out the stone shelves at the back of the building. A flight of steps led up one side of the room, ending in space where the wall had collapsed. Despite the lack of upper storeys and roof, the air was dank and smelt of rot and decay.

'Which one, do you reckon?' Fronz asked. He was whispering, though there could be nobody but themselves within miles. Nobody alive.

Arranged on the shelves were the caskets. Plain wooden coffins, devoid of adornment. Powlo crossed to them and shone the light close on the top of each.

'Is there a name plate?' Fronz asked.

'No.' Powlo continued his search.

'He's looking for one that's not dusty,' Nikole said.

‘That’s right.’ Powlo tapped the top of a coffin at the end of the line. ‘This one,’ he said. He tossed the torch to Fronz, who caught it awkwardly. Then he pulled the casket out and hefted it down to the floor.

‘We should have brought a crowbar or something,’ Nikole said.

Powlo already had his fingers under the lid. His face showed the strain as he pulled. Then with a creaking and a tearing, he wrenched the lid of the coffin upward. He stood over the casket for a few moments, drawing deep breaths and smiling with self-satisfaction. ‘Who needs a crowbar?’ he said.

Nikole peered down into the coffin. Fronz shone the light inside. ‘Is that him?’

‘Yeah, that’s the guy.’

The smell in the place had just got worse. It was at arm’s length that Powlo handed a small rolled bundle of surgical instruments from his jacket pocket to Nikole. ‘You do it,’ he said. ‘You’ve got more experience at this sort of thing than me.’

She took the package from him. ‘I didn’t think subtlety was a prerequisite.’

She pulled a large scalpel from the roll. A moment later she was standing astride the coffin. She leant down, reaching in, and started work.

Since he did not sleep, it was Clarence’s job to keep an eye on Benny’s room. He sat cross-legged at the end of the corridor, his eyes fixed on the door into the suite that Harper and Benny shared.

Imagination was not one of the faculties with which Clarence was overimbued. But as he sat there, sad and alone, he could imagine all sorts of things happening behind the door. Most of them the logical reasoning systems within his mind insisted were such a low probability as to be impossible. Some were less improbable.

But, whatever was actually happening (sleep was the highest-probability projection), Clarence felt guilty that he

was keeping a clandestine watch on his friend. There were the whisperings of a nascent conscience suggesting that he should let her see things how they really were, rather than create a rose-tinted world in which she was safe and oblivious to actual squalor and violence and heartache outside the bubble Clarence and Jason had created.

But, while the reasoning side of his complex mind wondered at the morality and predicted the reality, on an emotional level Clarence worried about what might happen if the bubble burst, if Benny lived the real life that was waiting for her out here on the Rim. And if she liked it as much as the projections said she would.

* * *

Jason was lying face down on his bed. He was fully clothed, even his boots were still on. He was snoring, and he was dreaming.

His dreams were not of the complexities of morality or the ethics of lying. Jason Kane had no worries about either. His fear was not of lying or cheating. He was afraid only of getting caught.

Once they were through the rotted and broken door, the inside was dark and cold and damp. And it smelt. Klensch wrinkled his nose and shone his torch quickly round the interior.

‘Over there,’ Linn said, moving his arm back so the torch beam came to rest on a set of stone shelves by the broken staircase.

‘Yes, that will be them,’ Klensch whispered.

‘It’s all right.’ She seemed amused. ‘Nobody’s going to hear us.’

‘What about the Cartel?’

‘Looks like we’re well ahead of them.’ She was inspecting the coffins arranged on the shelves. ‘We’d see their torches. Or hear them coming. They’re not exactly subtle, you know.’ She paused at the end of the shelves. ‘This one, I think. Bring the torch over, will you?’

Klench shone the beam of light on to the top of the coffin. Linn took the torch from him and handed him a crowbar. 'You're not enjoying this, are you?' she said.

'Are you?' He pushed the crowbar under the lid of the coffin, wondering if there would be room to lever off the lid without pulling the casket off the shelf. He took a breath and braced himself for the effort.

The coffin lid snapped up and Klench staggered forward in surprise. 'It's not fixed down,' he gasped. He dropped the crowbar and pulled at the lid. 'Everything's done on the cheap these days,' he complained. 'No pride any more. No sense of a job well done.'

Together they leant forward to see inside. The staring dead eyes of Miklos Frunt looked back at them.

'Didn't even close his eyes for him,' Klench said. 'I ask you.'

'I didn't know he wore a wig,' Linn said. 'Look, you can see the join.'

She reached inside, but Klench grabbed her hand and pulled it away. 'Have you no respect?' he hissed. Immediately he was contrite. 'Sorry,' he said. 'It's just, you know - seeing him...'

She smiled. 'I know.'

She stood back to let him empty the contents of the metal can into and over the coffin.

'What was that about respect?' she asked as he lit a match.

'This is different. It's what he would have wanted.' Klench tossed the match into the coffin, and they both jumped back as the tiny flames licked round the inside. 'This is cremation.'

The light from the flames flickered round the walls, sending the deeper shadows shivering away. It took only a few moments for the fire to catch hold properly. Smoke began to fill the ruined building and Klench pulled Linn back outside. 'At least we got here before the Cartel,' he said. 'Now we just have to get away again before anyone sees the fire.'

Linn stood watching for a while. She did not turn away until Klench called out to her for the third time. By then the flames were dancing out of the top of the ruins, feeling their way through the windows, roaring with enthusiasm.

Creer had set up his equipment in the villa's laboratory. The room was better suited to its main purpose of experimenting with ways of hiding hard drugs within everyday, legal commodities than to brain surgery. In fact, Creer was convinced, everything about this setup was less than ideal.

A large bad-tempered-looking man who had been forcibly inserted into a dark suit had delivered the brain to him. Creer had taken the plastic-wrapped bundle from the man carefully and set it down on a workbench.

'I was expecting to work from the whole body,' he confessed.

'Too heavy to carry,' the man had said. 'I was just told you wanted the brain.' He jabbed a finger at the grey mass swimming about in pink liquid within the transparent wrapping. 'That's a brain, isn't it?'

Creer was tempted to ask the man how he would know. But he restrained himself, muttered some thanks and shooed him out of the room. It was going to be a long night. What was left of it.

By the time most sane people began to think about getting up, Creer was almost ready. He was just making final adjustments to compensate for the fluid-level depletion caused by the time since death, when a group of people marched into the room. They were led by Mrs Winther. Close behind her was the large man with wrinkled face, grey hair and dangerous eyes. There was also a young woman with short, straight, dark hair, and the man who had brought the brain.

Creer held his surgically gloved hands up and tried to push the air back by way of telling them not to come too close. 'Please,' he said, 'this is a sterile environment.' Beside him the pale brain nestled on a metal plate. Several probes and electrodes stuck out of it so it looked like a child's potato hedgehog.

At this moment the door opened again, and another man walked in. He stopped on the threshold, suddenly caught in a fit of coughing. Creer dived in front of the brain, as if he

could prevent any bacteria from seeing it. 'Please!' he pleaded again. 'Professor Bloggs, please.'

'Sorry,' the professor mumbled through a grubby hanky. 'Must be the pollen. Or something.' He took a few steps into the room, then suddenly jabbed a grimy finger towards the grey mass. 'Is this the brain?'

Creer intercepted the finger and pushed the professor away. 'Please,' he said yet again. 'Anyone would think you were trying to ruin this venture before we'd even started.'

Professor Bloggs seemed astonished by the suggestion. 'My dear Creer,' he started. He frowned. 'Dear Creer. Hmm. Yes. No, I mean. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ha!' He laughed suddenly and stepped back to join the other onlookers. 'What a thought. Terrific sense of humour, old Creer, don't you think?' he confided in the others. 'No?'

Nobody answered.

'So what exactly are we going to see?' the woman with dark hair asked. 'I'd like to know that our little expedition was worthwhile.'

Creer pointed to a video monitor which was attached to a small control box. The control box was wired to the setup attached to the brain. 'On there,' he said, 'assuming that the brain is not too damaged either by the length of time since death, or by the manner of that death, we should be able to replay the last few moments of the, er, the donor's life. Actual events, memories, that sort of thing.'

'How many moments?' Mrs Winther asked. 'How long a time will we see?'

Creer shrugged. 'That depends on the condition of the relevant areas of the brain, and also the strength of the impression those events left. It could be several minutes, or perhaps just a few seconds.'

'And this, you think, will provide clues to help us find Dorpfeld's Prism?' Professor Bloggs asked.

'It had better,' Mrs Winther said.

The man with the floppy moustache worried Dent. He knew he had seen him somewhere before, but he couldn't place

him for the moment. It was distracting, watching the man sitting alone at a table in the corner of the hotel restaurant at breakfast. He seemed to be wearing a rucksack, which meant he had to hunch over the table. And he seemed to be deliberately avoiding looking at Dent and Benny. And he didn't seem to be eating anything. His coffee was untouched.

Benny had her back to the man, so she was not at all distracted. Dent found it difficult to pay attention to what she was saying. But some of it went in, and he found himself frowning as his brain struggled to process what he had half heard.

'I'm sorry,' Dent said. 'Run that by me again.'

'I said', Benny said patiently, 'that once we've picked up this Prism thing, it might be good to take the Star Ferry this afternoon and travel a bit further afield. Then we can book up a flight out to one of the less-developed worlds. You pick a good one.'

'Hang on, hang on.' Dent stared at her. 'Just like that?'

'Can't you just get on?' Benny was surprised. 'I didn't think you needed to book for the ferry.'

'No, no. Not the ferry.'

'Oh.' Benny smiled as she seemed to understand. 'Well, if we have to hang around for a few days to get a flight, that's fine.' She shrugged. 'I guess there must be something to do in this place.'

Dent was shaking his head. 'That's not what I was meaning,' he said. 'Tell me again about the Prism thing, as you call it'

'Oh well -' she sipped at her coffee '- we have to pick that up first.'

'Just like that?'

Benny set her coffee cup down on the saucer. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'You were there yesterday when we heard the recording of that call.' She poured more coffee. 'It seemed fairly clear-cut to me.' She set down the coffee pot and grinned at him. Annoyingly. 'So we know exactly where the thing is. Let's just finish our breakfast before we go and get it, shall we?'

The image on the screen was a blurred mess of white. Like standing in a snowstorm at night while wearing sunglasses, Jason thought with relief.

‘What is this?’ Luggar growled.

‘Dreams,’ Creer said. ‘He is asleep. This is as far back as I can go. There are no strong images; he is dozing rather than in deep sleep or REM.’

‘Useless,’ Mrs Winther snorted. ‘Completely useless.’

‘Did he die in his sleep?’ Jason asked.

‘He was anaesthetized,’ Powlo mumbled.

‘But only seconds before he died,’ Luggar explained.

Creer shook his head. ‘This is several minutes before. In that case he will wake up soon.’

As if in answer, the screen cleared. The image was still hazy and broken up, but it was at least possible to make out what it was.

‘No sound, unfortunately,’ Creer said quietly. ‘The aural centres are too far gone.’

Jason leant closer, as, he noticed, did everyone else. Such interest in a pair of shoes standing in a puddle on a carpet. As he watched, the point of view shifted. The man was looking up. He seemed to be in a lounge area - tables and chairs dotted about. A railing round the edge. A doorway into what could have been an indistinct restaurant.

He was looking at a woman. She was the only person within sight. She was pausing in front of the man, who, judging by the angle, was sitting down. Jason could judge the angle as he knew exactly how tall the woman was. The woman was Benny, and she was saying something.

‘Oh bugger,’ Jason said.

Creer touched a control and the picture froze. Everyone was looking at Jason.

‘A comment, Professor Bloggs?’ Creer asked.

Jason gulped. ‘Er, yes. Actually. I said “lip-reader”.’ He swallowed. ‘We need a lip-reader, to see what B-, to see what the woman is saying.’

Mrs Winther smiled. It was the first positive emotion she had shown during the meeting. 'An excellent suggestion. Professor. I can see that you are going to be a tremendous asset to us.' She nodded to the woman who had earlier been introduced to Jason as Nikole.

'Yes, Mrs Winther,' Nikole said. 'I'll see what I can do.'

Mrs Winther nodded to Creer, and the pictures began to move again. On the screen Benny smiled. Jason shook his head in disbelief. How did she do it?

Whether the man through whose eyes they were watching answered, they could not tell. But the angle changed as he stood up. Then the image lurched, and Benny loomed close. For a moment her face filled the screen, then there was a confused succession of images, followed by a pan round the lounge area. Finally, the point of view resolved itself into an escalator in the middle distance.

'Wait,' Luggar said urgently. Again the image froze. 'Replay that sequence,' he said quietly.

They all watched the confused succession of images again. Again it paused on the shot of the escalator.

'Well?' Mrs Winther asked.

Luggar shook his head. 'Difficult to tell,' he said. 'But I thought perhaps as they collided he passed something to the lady.'

Jason bit his tongue. 'He was sorely tempted to reply, 'That's no lady: that's my wife.' But somehow that didn't seem appropriate or helpful.

'Shall I keep going?' Creer asked.

Mrs Winther nodded. The escalator came shakily closer.

It was like watching news footage when the cameraman is running towards - or away from - the action. Then abruptly the movement stopped. The image panned again, and then suddenly Benny was once again in sight. She was further away now, her head slightly to one side. She said something, then smiled. As Jason watched, she turned and walked through the doorway.

Then the screen went blank.

‘That’s it,’ Creer said, somewhat irrelevantly. ‘I have a recording of course.’ He pulled wires and connections out of the brain until it was completely denuded. Then with a single brisk movement he tipped it into a stainless-steel bin and dusted his gloved hands against each other.

‘Was that the point of death?’ Nikole asked.

‘Yes,’ Luggar told her. ‘That was the coffee lounge outside the restaurant at the Xcelsior. He fell from that level down to the foyer.’

‘Then it’s clear what we need to do,’ Mrs Winther said. ‘Get over there and find out who the woman is. Take screenshots and see if the hotel have her registered, or if she was just there for that morning.’

‘She’s registered,’ Jason said. There was no point in waiting an hour for them to find out what he could get Brownie points for telling them now. ‘Her name is Bernice Summerfield.’ His mind was racing now, working through each possible course of action, trying to find the least bad scenario. ‘She’s a pro,’ Jason said. Everyone was looking at him now. ‘You need someone who knows her, knows her *modus operandi*.’ He caught sight of Powlo, watched him blink. ‘How she works,’ he added.

Mrs Winther was looking carefully at Jason. ‘Someone like yourself, perhaps?’

Jason shrugged. ‘I won’t deceive you, Mrs Winther,’ he said. ‘A woman of your intelligence will have realized by now that I’m not just an academic.’ He tightened his lips and stuck his chin out, bracing his legs slightly apart and pushing out his chest.

Mrs Winther nodded, a small smile creeping across her face. ‘As I suspected,’ she breathed.

It was infuriating that she seemed in no hurry either to explain where Dorpfeld’s Prism was hidden, or to get to it. In response to Dent’s increasingly impatient questioning, Benny had merely insisted that he was aware of everything that she was and could work it out for himself. He was not impressed.

They headed out towards the ferry port, Benny mentioning more often than Dent believed was strictly necessary how they could pick up the relic on their way. They paused to look in a shop window. The glass was grimy and scratched. A starburst of fracture lines marked one quarter of the pane. Dent sighed. Benny smiled. They moved on.

Further along the street, Benny hesitated in a shop doorway. Dent waited, and she eventually decided to go in. She ducked inside quickly, just as a man pushed his way out. Dent stood aside, and the man collapsed to the pavement without a sound.

‘I know how you feel,’ Dent muttered as he stepped over the body. It was hot inside - maybe the heat had got to him.

When they emerged from the shop a few minutes later, the man was gone. ‘Hope he’s feeling better,’ Dent remarked.

‘Who?’ Benny asked.

‘Oh, no one. Don’t worry.’ Let her wonder what he was talking about for a change.

As they set off down the street, the shop window exploded into fragments of glass. Benny seemed not to notice, but Dent glanced back at the glistening, sharp mess on the pavement. ‘I don’t know where they get their glass,’ he muttered, ‘but it’s not the absolute best, is it?’

Ahead of him, as Dent ran to catch her up, Benny was shouldering aside a large woman laden down with plastic bags. The woman seemed to lose her balance as Benny passed, her foot slipping off the pavement. In slow motion she toppled sideways, the bags falling and spilling their contents over the road. Fruit mainly. Dent paused to help her up, but Benny was already disappearing into the distance. So he settled for a quick ‘Sorry about my friend,’ and ran after her.

An orange ran slowly along the gutter and stopped in the slats of a storm drain.

‘Look,’ Jason said exasperated, ‘will you stop shooting at her and just listen to me for a moment.’

'You got a better plan?' Powlo demanded as he lowered the rifle.

'Actually yes.'

Powlo waited. His expression had not changed. Beside him Fronz stared back at Jason equally impassively.

'Look,' Jason said, 'she's a pro. Right? You can tell by the way she dodged into the shop, by the way she used that woman as a shield without even seeming to notice us.'

Powlo and Fronz exchanged glances as they considered this. 'So?' Powlo said. 'We hit her with a dart, take her back to the villa and find out what she knows.'

'She won't tell you anything. Even if you can catch her,' Jason said. He tried to sound calm and in control. 'It's better just to let her go.'

'Let her go,' Powlo repeated. 'Let her go.' He sounded out each word carefully as if searching within for a hidden meaning.

'Yes. And follow her.'

'Follow her.'

Jason looked up at the smog-laden sky barely visible between the high-rise buildings. 'To see where she goes,' he said slowly and clearly. 'Wait for her to lead us to Dorpfeld's Prism rather than stop her and upset her.'

'Then what?' Powlo asked.

'Well, then we can go and get it off her.'

'You could use the gun,' Fronz offered helpfully.

Powlo brightened at this thought. 'Yeah,' he said.

'Yeah,' Jason repeated. 'Well, let's just follow and wait till she finds the thing first.' He crossed his fingers behind his back. With luck Benny had no intention of finding the thing. She would be happy just to let the expenses pay for her holiday. Probably. Let's hope we don't lose her,' he said, hopefully.

After dragging the unconscious body away from the shop doorway, Clarence followed Benny and Dent at what he hoped was a safe distance. The shooting seemed to have stopped now, thank goodness. Jason must have managed to

bring his colleagues round to the way of thinking he and Clarence had discussed.

They were close to Klench's offices now. As he watched, Benny took Dent's hand and pulled him down a narrow side alley. Clarence hurried after them.

'They've ducked into an alley,' Fronz said. 'What are they doing? Is this it?'

'I hope not,' Jason muttered. 'Let's wait for them to come out again,' he said out loud.

'What are they up to?' Klench said. He dabbed at his face with a cloth. The heat was becoming unbearable and he wasn't used to this exercise.

Linn had a pair of binoculars and was staring through them. She was positioned so that she could see down the alleyway. 'They seem to be going through your rubbish,' she said.

Dent cleared his throat. 'Er,' he said, 'could I ask just one question?'

Benny was leaning into a large rubbish skip. She had pushed the lid back, then dived inside. Her bottom and legs were sticking out, which was fine by Dent. But he would have appreciated knowing what was going on.

The legs kicked in the air a few times, then slid back down to the ground, the rest of Benny following. She looked worried. Grubby, but worried. 'It's practically empty,' she said.

Not knowing quite what he was supposed to do about this, Dent leant into the skip and checked for himself. 'Yes,' he agreed. 'Not a lot in there. Apart from the smell of rubbish past.'

'Give me your communicator thingy,' Benny said.

Dent handed it over and watched as she pushed the buttons. 'Who are you calling?'

'She seems to be calling someone,' Linn said.

‘Sorry?’ Klench’s comm had started buzzing in his jacket pocket. It drowned out Linn’s voice.

‘I said she’s calling someone,’ Linn shouted back. ‘Shouldn’t you answer that?’

Klench shook his head. ‘It can wait. Can’t be important. What’s she doing now?’

‘Still calling,’ Linn said loudly over the buzzing. ‘Her lips aren’t moving, so whoever it is can’t be answering.’

They stood for a few moments without moving. The buzzing continued. Then Linn lowered the binoculars and looked at Klench. At the same moment Klench’s mouth dropped open.

‘Quick,’ she said.

He fumbled and tugged in his pockets, eventually managing to drag out the communicator.

‘Act calm, be surprised,’ Linn said as he answered the call.

‘Hello, Professor Summerfield,’ Klench said at once. ‘This is a surprise.’ His eyes widened as he realized what he’d said. ‘Oh, er, yes,’ he stammered awkwardly. ‘Lucky guess.’

Jason tried to sound disappointed and angry. ‘Oh, no,’ he said. ‘Really? Out the other end of the alley.’ He tutted for a while. ‘We should have thought of that,’ he said. ‘Oh well.’

‘Mrs Winther won’t be pleased,’ Powlo said. He did not sound altogether pleased himself.

Jason nodded. He would need a plan here. Something to make it look like he hadn’t just let them walk away. ‘What’s down that alley?’ he asked. ‘I don’t think they just used it as a short cut. Too obvious. It’s important. A clue.’

Fronz shook his head. ‘Just rubbish skips,’ he said. ‘That’s all.’

Jason’s eyes lit up. He snapped his fingers. ‘That’s it,’ he proclaimed. ‘Of course.’

‘What?’ Powlo said suspiciously.

Jason nodded, trying to sound logical and convincing as he said the most outrageous and unlikely thing he could think of. ‘They’re after the rubbish,’ he said. ‘Now where would it have been taken, assuming they didn’t find what they were after?’

‘Landfill Major,’ Fronz said.

Jason nodded as if he had been well aware of this all along. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said with passion, ‘that’s where we have to go. That’s where Summerfield and her henchman will be.’ Behind his grim facade, Jason was smiling. That should take them well away from Benny and Harper. Clarence could handle them from now on while Jason continued to lead Powlo and his friends astray.

Powlo’s suspicious expression had broken into a slow smile as he deciphered Jason’s words. He now seemed pleased. As Jason watched, he pulled out a communicator and punched in a number. ‘We got ‘em,’ he said with evident satisfaction. ‘They’re picking up the goods at Landfill Major.’

Jason said nothing. He was already working on the final small piece of his plan. The staying-alive-and-getting-away part.

‘So where are we going now?’ Dent asked as Benny waved to a taxi. ‘More dumpster diving?’

‘Klench says the skip was emptied yesterday evening,’ Benny said as she handed the comm back to Dent. ‘Does Landfill Major mean anything to you at all?’

Dent nodded. ‘And if you tell me what it means to you I’ll tell you what it means to me,’ he said.

Benny grinned. ‘You’ll show me yours if I show you mine, eh? OK. That’s where we’re going.’

‘And why is that?’ Dent asked.

‘Because that’s where Dorpfeld’s Prism is.’

‘And how do you know?’

‘Because,’ Benny answered, ‘that’s where Miklos Frunt said it was. At least, he told Klench it was in the rubbish.’

Dent frowned, thinking back to the call they had listened to. ‘“You’re trash.” That’s what he said.’ Dent laughed. It was pretty obvious put that way. ‘And everyone thought he was saying to Klench “You are trash.”’

‘That’s right,’ Benny said. ‘He told Klench he was right outside, then said “rubbish”. When Klench didn’t understand

that, he said, "Your trash." He was telling Klensch where he'd hidden the relic.'

'And Klensch thought he was just being rude.'

Benny nodded. 'And now the trash has been taken away. To Landfill Major.'

As he thought through this, Dent glanced up. For a moment he thought that the taxi driver was looking back at him, thought he caught a glimpse of the man's eyes in the rear-view mirror. But before he could think about this the driver pulled out a communicator with one hand, and spoke into it

'Picked up two at, er, in transit,' the driver mumbled. 'Taking them to Landfill Major.'

There was a squawk from the handset. It sounded like a distorted cry of 'Oh bugger!'

The driver smiled apologetically, and put away the communicator. As he leant forward, Dent noticed that he had a floppy, black moustache. Must be the fashion this month, he decided.

Gunzo Macklin had little to do except watch the traffic. He had lost a leg after being mugged three years ago. His remaining joints were stiff with arthritis, and his hearing was on the way out. But his eyesight was still sharp, for which he gave daily thanks.

He sat behind his stall, hoping and intending to sell enough to pay for a meal and rent that day and little more. Few people stopped at the stall. Fewer bought any of his dried fruit and flowers. So he watched the traffic.

He had once seen two hearses, one following the other. On an occasion a year ago three ambulances had passed within a minute and a half. His record was a succession of five red ground cars.

But he could not recall ever having seen three taxis so close together before. *One* was something of an event in this part of the city. The first was driven by a maniac with a moustache who seemed to have no idea of which side of the road he should be on. Close behind him was another taxi with a

small rotund man sweating in the back, next to a pretty young woman. And behind them was a third taxi, with a large man leaning out of the back window. It was difficult to see who else, if anyone, was inside, but the man looked dangerous enough on his own.

Gunzo watched in increasing disbelief as each of the taxis in turn took the narrow road leading to Landfill Major.

For a rubbish tip the place was incredibly well organized and tidy. It seemed to be entirely automated. A line of standard skips like the one Benny had dived into in the alley waited patiently. A robot tractor picked a skip from the front of the line and disappeared with it into the distance. When it returned over the horizon, the skip was empty and was then added to another line waiting to be taken away.

‘No way,’ Dent said as he paid the taxi driver.

‘What do you mean?’ Benny asked when Dent had finished an involved conversation that seemed to revolve around convincing the driver that he - the driver - should charge for the journey.

‘I mean,’ Dent said, still evidently distracted by the strange conversation, ‘that if they’ve emptied Klench’s skip there is just no way we can dig the thing up again.’

‘Then let’s hope they haven’t emptied it yet,’ Benny said as she started running towards the line of full skips.

They were still examining the first skip when the tractor returned and grabbed it. Dent leapt to one side as the claw attachment on the back of the machine lifted the skip on to the tractor’s back.

‘That’s it, look.’ Dent pointed after the tractor.

‘That one?’ Benny asked. ‘How do you know?’

Dent continued to point. ‘Because it has the address on the back, see? Probably so they can bill for the collection service.’

‘Oh yes,’ Benny said. They stood watching for a self-congratulatory moment. Then they broke into a run.

‘What are they doing now?’ Linn asked. She was slightly annoyed that Klench had taken control of the binoculars. She

was rather more annoyed that he wasn't telling her what was going on.

'They're chasing the skip,' Klensch said. He shrugged and handed the binoculars to Linn.

She adjusted the zoom and watched. The tractor tipped the skip up, emptying its contents next to a line of similar piles of garbage. Further along the line a dozer was pushing the piles together and then sweeping them into a huge crater in the middle of the site.

'Rather them than me,' she said as she watched Benny and Harper kicking and pulling at the pile of rubbish.

'Hurry up,' Benny shouted. The dozer was getting perilously close now.

'You could be wrong,' Dent suggested. 'Maybe it's not here.'

'We won't be here if you don't hurry up,' Benny shouted back above the noise of the approaching dozer.

'What did this thing look like again?' Dent asked.

'Piece of glass on a chain,' Benny said. 'You'll know it.'

'That's what I thought,' Dent said. The smugness was obvious in his tone as he brushed himself down. He held up his hand and from it dropped a large crystal of cut glass. It was tarnished and had something unpleasant and dark sticking to it, but it was definitely crystal. And it hung from a silver chain.

Without comment, Benny grabbed Dent's hand and pulled him out of the path of the dozer.

'What?' he complained. 'Oh, thanks. You're so very thoughtful, you know.' He took a deep breath. 'Taste that spring air,' he said as if entranced. 'Listen to the birds singing.'

'Well,' Benny said, ignoring his words. She was laughing, dusting herself down. 'That's a relief. A job well done, I must say.' She had the lead-lined bag out of her rucksack and pushed it down over the necklace, pulling it away from Dent as she did so.

Dent blinked. 'Oh, God,' he said. 'Let's get away from here and have a bath.'

Linn handed the binoculars back to Klench. 'She's got it! She's actually got it! Look.' She pointed across the landscape towards where Benny and Dent were apparently dancing a little jig.

But Klench was pointing the binoculars slightly away from them. 'I don't think so,' he said quietly. 'Not for long, anyway.'

Linn looked where Klench was pointing. She screwed up her eyes, and could just make out the two large figures walking slowly, purposefully, towards the oblivious dancers.

It seemed a long walk back. They trudged slowly across the barren, rubbish-strewn landscape. Benny was still carrying the bag. Dent had his hands behind his head. Behind them Powlo and Fronz kept their guns steadily aimed at their prisoners' backs.

'So where are we going?' Benny asked. 'Just so we know how underdressed we are, you understand.'

'Mrs Winther wants a word with you,' Powlo said.

'Is that good?' Benny hissed hopefully to Dent.

He shook his head. 'She's the head of the Cartel. It's a long way from good.'

'How far?'

'As far as this place is from smelling of roses.'

They were approaching a large black ground car. The glass was tinted, but the side window was down and a corpulent lady with permed grey hair and the suspicion of a blue rinse was looking out.

'Not good at all then,' Benny summarized as they reached the car. From the expression on the woman's face and the way the men behind Benny and Dent were holding their guns, that seemed to be an understatement.

Benny glanced round. There was nobody within sight to call on for help. There was nowhere to run for shelter. Just the car, and the men, and the guns.

'If we're dead,' Dent whispered to Benny, 'then we can count ourselves lucky.'

CHAPTER 9

Mrs Winther's face was twisted into what seemed to be an approximation of a smile. 'I assume that you have Dorpfeld's Prism in there.' She nodded her large head towards the bag that Benny was holding.

Benny nodded back. 'And I assume, given the men with guns and other subtle clues, that you want me to hand it over to you.'

The smile froze on the old woman's wide face. It was as if she had suddenly and unexpectedly been insulted by Benny's words.

'No,' she said.

'The game's up, Benny,' Dent said. 'Just hand it - what?'

'No,' Mrs Winther repeated. Her voice seemed to have risen slightly in pitch and her eyes had widened. It was as if the very thought was enough to scare her. 'No, I don't want it. Not at all.'

'Then why', Benny asked slowly, 'are you here?'

'And why', Dent added, 'are we here? With guns pointed at us.'

'Well,' Mrs Winther said, 'I just, that is... I wanted to congratulate you on finding it. That's all.'

Dent and Benny looked at each other.

'I'm sorry,' Benny said. 'My friend here is obviously misinformed. He told me you were some sort of robber baroness who would want such a valuable property for herself with no regard for the legitimate ownership or even the morality of finders-keepers. But', she went on, 'you just wanted to congratulate us on finding it. Is that right?'

Mrs Winther nodded again, though she seemed to be having some difficulty moving her head without discomfort. 'Yes,' she said through gritted teeth, evidently annoyed at the implications of Benny's question. 'That's it exactly.'

Congratulations,' she ground out. 'Well done. Now take it and go.'

The larger of the two armed men behind Benny and Dent took a step forward. 'Mrs Winther?' he said uncertainly.

'Yes, Powlo, let them go,' she said with a sort of weary resignation. 'You did very well to bring them here, though perhaps next time a kinder, more verbal invitation would suffice.' She looked at Benny. 'Thank you for your time. Sorry to have inconvenienced you.'

'Oh,' Benny said brightly, 'it's no inconvenience.'

'Yes it is,' the woman said huffily. 'Believe me.'

'Whatever you say, Mrs Winther, er, ma'am,' Dent said quickly. Then he took Benny by the elbow and steered her back towards the point on the horizon beyond which they had left their taxi.

'What's the rush?' Benny asked as Dent hastened his walk into a run.

'You want to be shot in the back?'

'Oh lighten up,' she told him. 'I don't know what it is with you. Jumping at shadows, seeing danger round every comer, suggesting kindly old women are mass murderers.'

'They are,' Dent said as he dragged her along. 'That is, she is.'

Benny shook her arm free as she ran. 'It's just another example of how kind and generous the folk out here on the Rim really are. I think you're seriously paranoid,' she said. 'That's what I think.'

'Are you getting at me?' Dent demanded as they reach the taxi.

Linn put down the binoculars. 'I just don't believe it,' she said for the fourth time. 'She just let them go. With the Prism.'

'Never mind believing it,' Klench told her as she pack away the binoculars. 'Let's hope our taxi's still there.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't fancy a long walk home,' he told her. 'And because we'd better be innocently waiting in my office when

Professor Summerfield and Mr Dent deliver Dorpfeld's Prism to us. Come on.'

Powlo and Fronz waited impatient and confused by the car. Mrs Winther was still leaning out of the window, as if afraid to move.

'When I eventually get out of here. Professor Bloggs,' she said, her anger undisguised, 'you are a dead man. Just as soon as that knife moves from my neck.'

There was no reply. She struggled to turn slightly, but she could still feel the point of the knife jabbing into her soft skin.

Powlo was leaning forward now, looking in through the window. 'Mrs Winther,' he said.

'Not now, Powlo. Can't you see I'm talking to Professor Bloggs?'

'But Mrs Winther,' Powlo insisted, 'there's nobody there.'

She turned slowly, carefully. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Luggar slumped unconscious across the steering column of the ground car. She turned slightly further; still there was no word from Bloggs.

Now she could see the knife. She reached round behind her head, expecting at any moment to be told to turn back. But there was no comment. She felt the blade of the knife, grasped it, and eased it away from her neck. Then she turned fully round.

And saw that the knife had been wedged between the top of her seat and the headrest. The back door of the car was open. There was no sign of Professor Bloggs.

The shop was open, although there was no sign of any customers. Linn Sekka was at the customer-service desk, arranging papers into apparently random piles. She looked flustered and breathless, as if she had been running.

'Professor Summerfield,' she said brightly as they entered. 'And Mr Harper. How nice to see you again.'

'Is Mr Klench available?' Benny asked.

'I'm sure he will be,' she replied. 'For you.' There was a comm on the table, buried beneath one of the piles of papers. Linn unearthed it and pressed a button. 'Professor Summerfield and Mr Harper to see you, sir.'

'How very gratifying,' squeaked Klench's voice through the small speaker. 'Send them up right away.'

Klench was waiting for them at the lift doors in his office. The light glinted on the pebble lenses of his spectacles as he greeted them and waved them to seats.

'Now then,' he said when they were arranged to his satisfaction, 'what can I do for you? More expenses perhaps? Information?'

'Dorpfeld's Prism,' Benny said simply.

'Ah, you have a lead.' Klench looked across at Linn and raised his eyebrows as if impressed. 'Very good. Quick work.'

Before Benny could reply Klench's comm buzzed.

'Will you excuse me?' Klench said as he answered. 'Jericko Klench, antiques and curios for the discerning,' he said into the communicator. 'How can I -' He broke off abruptly, took the communicator from his ear and looked at it. 'Hmm,' he said in annoyance before putting it away again. 'I do apologize. Now, where were we?'

'Dorpfeld's Prism,' Linn prompted.

'Oh yes, thank you, Miss Sekka.' He turned to Benny again. 'You have a lead, did you say?'

'No, no,' Benny said smiling. 'We have Dorpfeld's Prism.' She held up the bag. 'Here.'

Klench pointed at the bag, astonished. 'In there? Already?' He shook his head in disbelief. 'What can I say?'

'How about "Good work, here's your money"?' Dent suggested.

If anything, Klench seemed more astonished at this than at Benny and Dent's successful recovery of the relic. His mouth opened and closed. He looked at Linn, then back at Dent.

'Well?' Benny prompted.

'Well, er, yes,' Klench agreed. 'Absolutely.' He pulled open a drawer of his desk and rummaged inside. 'I'm afraid you've caught me somewhat on the hop,' he admitted as he closed

the drawer and started on another one. 'I'm not sure I have much petty cash lying around. And you were rather dismissive of my suggestion of a money-transfer order.' He closed the drawer with an air of finality and sat back in his chair. 'No,' he said simply.

'No?'

Klench shrugged. 'I'm sorry, Professor, but I have to admit that the speed of your success has taken me quite by surprise. I was intending to go to the bank tomorrow morning just in case you achieved an early result.' He threw his arms open in a gesture that seemed designed to combine apology, honesty and openness. 'If you could call back tomorrow...' he hazarded. 'Around lunchtime?'

Dent stared at him, poker-faced. 'You are joking,' he said.

Klench gave a short laugh. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'But no, I am not joking.' He leant forward across the desk towards Benny. He reached out towards the bag. 'May I?'

'No, you may not,' Dent told him sharply, knocking his hand away. 'You get the relic when we get paid. Not before.'

Klench was crestfallen. 'Oh.' The dismay was heavy in his voice. 'Oh, well...' His face crumpled, and his top lip began to quiver. He gave a quick sniff, and wiped a grubby handkerchief quickly across his face, culminating in a loud session of nose-blowing.

Benny sighed and tossed the bag on to the desk. It landed with a heavy thump beside the blotter.

'Benny!' Dent said.

She shrugged. 'We know where he is,' she said. 'It's not like he's going to do a runner, is it?' She nodded to where Klench was hastily shaking open the bag. 'I mean, you can tell he's a decent and honest man.'

There was a hint of doubt in her voice as she spoke. But any doubts she actually had were dispelled immediately the relic fell to the desk top and Klench picked it up. He held the prism in his hands for a while, cradling it. The light reflected off the facets as if it were actually glowing from within and shone on Klench's face. His expression was one of pure joy. His shoulders seemed more relaxed, his spectacles somehow

clearer, and the eyes behind were wide with amazement and a kind of euphoria. There was suddenly an artless quality about him that echoed Benny's words. He looked, in short, like the most honest and trustworthy man she had ever seen.

Dent could see it too. Benny could tell. For one thing, he wasn't complaining. 'All right,' Dent said slowly. 'Tomorrow, then.'

'Yes,' Klench said, his voice barely more than a whisper. He had taken out his hanky again and was wiping some of the grime of the rubbish dump off the silver chain. Then he started to polish the crystal prism vigorously. He seemed to be in a world of his own.

'With a bonus for efficiency,' Dent said.

'Of course,' Klench replied at once. 'That seems very fair.'

Benny and Dent exchanged smiles of satisfaction. Linn's eyebrows rose up her forehead by an alarming amount.

'Well,' said Benny a little awkwardly, 'until tomorrow, then.' She reached across the desk to shake Klench's hand.

'Professor Summerfield, Mr Harper,' Klench said as he shook each of their hands in turn. 'You are without doubt the most gifted, talented, helpful, generous and -' he paused as if running out of superlatives '- beautiful', he eventually decided, 'people I have ever had the great fortune to do business with. If there is anything I can do to help you, ever, please just name it.'

Linn was still staring at Klench, her eyes wide and her mouth open, when Benny and Dent entered the lift.

'We'll see ourselves out,' Dent said as the doors closed.

Benny was grinning widely. 'Oh,' she said, 'what a nice man.'

Dent's puzzled expression was the mirror of Linn's. 'Yes,' he said. 'I wonder what he's up to.'

Jason pulled open the door of the taxi and climbed inside. 'Thought I'd find you here,' he said.

Clarence shifted position slightly in an effort to make his wings more comfortable behind him. 'They've handed it over and they're just leaving.'

Jason nodded. 'Everything OK?'

'Klench says he'll pay them tomorrow.'

'Oh, yeah?' Jason said with a laugh. 'I've used that one myself.'

From somewhere behind them came a thumping sound, a steady rhythmic pounding. Both Clarence and Jason ignored it.

'Still,' Jason went on, 'it should just be a question of keeping them out of trouble from the usual street rats and environmental hazards again now.'

The thumping sound was louder now, more insistent. Clarence had to talk loudly to make himself heard over it. 'How did you get on?'

'Oh, I don't think Professor Bloggs will be top of Mrs Winther's Christmas-card list,' Jason shouted above the hammering. He sighed. 'I suppose we'd better let him out and then get after Benny.'

Clarence waited round the corner while Jason opened the taxi's boot. He helped out the infuriated driver and dusted him down. 'Good job I heard you,' Jason told the man. 'Lucky I managed to open the boot.'

He rejoined Clarence and together they set off after the dwindling forms of Benny and Dent Harper. 'Miserable sod,' Jason muttered. 'I know he'd only just come round from the anaesthetic, but even so... He could at least have said thank you.'

She said nothing for a long time. She had assumed at first that he was simply overawed with the relic. But, after several minutes of watching him staring at it in something close to an uncharacteristic state of enchantment, Linn decided she should say something.

'Are you all right?' was what she settled on.

'All right?' Klench mused. His voice had taken on an almost musical singsong quality. 'All right? I'm marvellous.' He looked up at her. His spectacles seemed to magnify the size and depth of his eyes as he stared at her. His face softened. 'Isn't life simply wonderful, my darling?' he said dreamily.

‘I’m not your darling,’ she said. ‘And things have been better.’

He did not seem to be upset by her sharp tone. ‘We’re the luckiest people in the world,’ he said. ‘In the universe, even.’ His face was now a huge, ridiculous smile.

Linn could not help but smile back. ‘What is it?’ she asked. ‘What are you up to?’

Klench did not answer. He was staring out of the window across the smog-drenched city. ‘So beautiful,’ he murmured. ‘Paradise made real. Olympus come to us.’

‘I appreciate that you’re rather pleased with yourself now you’ve got the thingy,’ Linn said, ‘but what do we do with it now?’ She sat herself down on the desk in front of him and swung her long legs back and forth. ‘You still haven’t told me what it’s for.’

‘For?’ he said, his eyes becoming impossibly wider and deeper. ‘Why, Linn my dear - it’s for you.’

She laughed out loud. ‘Now I know you’re joking.’

Klench was holding out his hands, the back of one in the palm of the other like a communicant about to receive the Eucharist wafer. Dorpfeld’s Prism rested on the top palm. ‘For you,’ he said gently. ‘AH this has been for you.’

Linn stopped swinging her legs and looked at him carefully. Apart from the fact that his face was a lunatic mask of happy dreaminess, he seemed serious. Tentatively, she reached out for the necklace. Her hand stopped just shy of it, but Klench nodded encouragingly to her. She took it.

‘Whoa!’ Klench said as the Prism left his hand. He blinked and shook his head. ‘That’s some technology you know.’ He rubbed at his forehead and looked up at Linn, aware that she had not answered.

She was still sitting on his desk, Dorpfeld’s Prism around her neck. She was swinging her legs again. And she was humming.

Klench leant back in his chair and watched her. He watched her for a while, transfixed. She seemed so happy, so contented, that it made his eyes water. He watched the shape of each leg as it moved, watched the pattern it traced in the

air. He examined the curve of her body as it rose up from the desk. He stared at the beautiful happiness on her face and in every arc of her form.

After a while she seemed to notice he was watching her. She fixed her eyes on his and smiled. Her face lifted, the joy spreading still further across it. God, she was beautiful. Klench loosened his collar and grabbed his handkerchief. 'Linn?' he said quietly, hesitantly.

'Yes, Jericko,' she said. Her voice was a lilting melody.

'You never called me Jericko before,' he said. Even as he spoke he was aware that it was a silly thing to say. But she seemed not to mind.

'Jericko,' she said again, rolling the name round her mouth experimentally. 'Jericko.' She nodded. 'It's a nice name,' she decided. 'A nice name for a nice man.'

Klench gulped. 'Do you think so?' He stood up, reaching out for her. 'Do you really think so?' He pulled her blouse gently forward so that the Prism dropped behind it, out of view.

'Oh yes.'

She did not object as he closed his arms round her, pulled her towards him. Her body was warm and strong. He closed his sweaty hands together behind her back.

'I've always liked you,' Linn said as she nestled in. 'Really I have. Ever since I met you.'

'Liked me?' Klench's voice was sticky. He had trouble saying the words. 'Loved me?' One of her breasts was pressed against his glasses, pushing them up over his ears.

'Oh yes.' She seemed to curl up inside his arms, her head resting on the greasy bald top of his own. 'You've been so kind, so good to me. I was so young and naive when I met you, but you were so... considerate. I think I loved you from the first time we met.'

Klench let out a long breath he did not realize he had been holding. 'Oh, Linn,' he murmured.

'Loved you,' she repeated as he held her even closer. 'Loved you like a father.'

For a moment they were frozen together in tableau. Then Klench abruptly sprang back, almost falling over his chair 'What?' he demanded in a breathless squeal of dismay.

'The gerontium miners of Baglingwort Minimus promised me a small fortune if I would help them. The problem was really quite straight-forward, though it had kept them perplexed and in thrall for many years.

'The gerontium was mined in the old-fashioned manner - traditional, I think they would have said. It was hewn from the load-bearing rock with pick and axe, then shovelled in small trucks that ran on narrow rails through the low tunnels back into the daylight. The processing plant was a more modern affair, and was owned by an ore dealer from Mawaii. He was an unpleasant fellow, and he paid a basic price plus a bonus calculated from the weight of refined gerontium extracted from the rock that the miners delivered.

'Except, of course, that he didn't. And this was the problem. The miners worked crushingly long hours in the dark and the dust. They bled their lives away in that hellhole. And the dealer from Mawaii paid them an insultingly low base rate.

'But that was fine because the bonus he promised was actually quite generous. Except that he never paid it. Whenever the miners asked him for their bonus, he would bluster and fuss and tell them he needed to check his sums. 'Tomorrow,' he would say. Always "Tomorrow." And, as you and I know only too well, tomorrow never comes.

'And so it went on. The miners, every week, went to the dealer from Mawaii. And every week he paid them a subsistence wage and told them, "Tomorrow." For a long time the miners believed him, gave him the benefit of the doubt, expected that one day he would live up to his promises. Then they fell into the habit of not getting the bonus. It became a joke.

'Then, after a long, long while, it was no longer a joke. But they were no longer strong or determined enough to do

anything about it apart from grumble and moan and deliver the rock on schedule and hear him say, "Tomorrow."

'Until I arrived.

I was working on a tour guide for the frontier worlds. You know the sort of thing, I'm sure. Lots of glossy pictures and equally glossy annotations. Throw in a few anecdotes, list the restaurants and give them a random sprinkling of stars. People lap it up.

'Not that Baglingwort Minimus merited a mention. But since I was in the area, and any research is good research, or at the very least is tax-deductible, I dropped in for a few nights.

I listened to the miners' story with increasing degrees of disgust, anger and resentment. "So," I said when they'd finished their bar room anecdote, "what are you going to do about it?"

There was a silence then. I don't think it had occurred to them they could do anything. So I explained that the gerontium was worth mining, and it was worth refining. The dealer from Mawaii was making a fortune out of them, and they should get their share. If it came to it, they could manage without the dealer and go straight to the conglomerates of Hastavarian Four. After all, I told them as they listened in amazement to my suggestions, you should never trust anyone from Mawaii. The i's are too close together.

It started from there, from that bar-side chat over a few beers after a grubby day's dusty labour. We hammered out a deal, and they agreed to let me be their spokesperson. Off we went the next night, the miners with their most brutal-looking equipment - picks, shovels, laser probes and blasting gel. We marched up to the processing plant and demanded to see the manager.

'He couldn't really refuse to see us. He seemed remarkably controlled about it all when I explained that he had milked the miners for too long, and that now they had learnt from him and from his methods. I suppose he did the sums, and worked out that he'd had a good long run and wasn't likely to

make enough profit for it to be worth hanging around now he'd been rumbled. He left the next morning, and the miners took over the processing plant.

'I had a couple of free days before I needed to get to my next interstellar connection. So I helped them get the plant going and divvy up the various work so that things were humming along quite smoothly.

'They all came to see me off. It was quite touching really. There were the miners and their wives and families, A huge ring of lines of grubby faces smiling through their dusty countenances at me. The leader was a huge man called Ginge. He swallowed my hand in his palm, and pumped my arm up and down until the muscles ached. Mine, not his.

'And, as he held my hand and everyone waved and cheered, I broached the subject of my fee. I mentioned the sum we had agreed, and he smiled and nodded and patted me on the back like an old drinking pal. "Of course," he said. "Of course." And his smile cracked into a full grin as he added, "Tomorrow."

'They'd learnt rather more from the dealer than I had intended.'

They were picking their way through the dry patches between the puddles. The drizzle had stopped for the moment, but there was no sign of sun. From the distance came the sound of the Star Ferry lifting ponderously from its moorings.

'Do I have to guess the moral of the story?' Benny asked.

'I think you know the moral of the story,' Dent said. 'Whether it is relevant to our own situation, we shall discover.'

Benny nodded. 'Tomorrow,' she said. She grinned. 'But I live every day for itself.'

* * *

Just as Jericko Klench was deciding that things could not really get any worse, the lift arrived with a 'ding'. He had not noticed anyone in the shop below on the security camera, but then he had been staring into a space just in front of where Linn was swinging her legs.

The lift doors slid open. And things got worse.

Clarence stopped in mid-step. 'Oh,' he said. Then, as if that settled it, he started walking again.

'Oh?' Jason asked. 'What do you mean "Oh"? We're back to "Oh" now, are we?'

'I can still monitor the listening device on the window of Klench's office,' Clarence said. 'I haven't been listening, of course. Now that we no longer have a professional interest, it wouldn't be...' He shrugged.

'Polite?' Jason suggested.

Clarence nodded.

'So,' Jason said, 'what is it that you haven't heard?'

They had moved Linn gently to another table. Apparently in the belief that she was either an imbecile or drunk, or maybe both. The larger of the two extremely large men – the younger one – had simply lifted her bodily from the desk and deposited her on a side table. Her smile never faltered, and her legs never stopped swinging. Dorpfeld's Prism remained concealed behind the flimsy material of her blouse. Klench tried to keep his eyes off it, which he found difficult enough at the best of times.

This was not, he could already tell, the best of times. He sat shaking silently behind his desk as Linn was cleared from it. There were four of them: the two heavies, a young woman with short, straight, dark hair, and Mrs Winther. Klench shrank back into his seat as Mrs Winther sat down opposite him. She was smiling. It was not pleasant.

'I think, Mr Klench, that you can help me,' she said. 'I think you have something I want.'

'Oh?' He tried very hard to keep his voice level and calm. The result was a noise like a pig in pain. But at least he had the capacity to make some sort of sound. His confidence boosted by this first minor success, he struggled on. 'And what is that, Mrs Winther? An antique for your collection? Nice painting?'

She had stopped smiling. Suddenly Klench appreciated her smile, now that it was gone. 'You know what I mean,' she said.

He shook his head dumbly. She was bluffing.

'Er, is this because of those... those two loon-lunatics I just threw out?' he stammered.

'They ain't lunatics, and you didn't throw them out,' the older man said.

'But thank you for telling us they were here,' Mrs Winther said.

Klench swallowed. He could hear Linn humming to herself again. It didn't help.

'No,' Mrs Winther went on, 'we found you from this.' She snapped her fingers, though in fact they made a noise more like jelly being dropped. In response the older of the two heavies tossed something to Klench.

He fumbled it, nearly dropped it, caught it at last. It was a personal communicator. It was Miklos Frunt's. Klench tried to look confused.

'Now,' Mrs Winther said as if explaining to a child, 'that belonged to the man who stole the commodity that we - that I - desire.'

Klench was definitely not looking at Linn now. He was certainly not staring at her blouse.

'There is only one number preprogrammed into that.' Mrs Winther nodded to the communicator that Klench was juggling between his sweaty, slippery hands. 'It is an unlisted, untraceable number.'

'So?' Klench managed to gasp out.

'So we rang it,' the chief heavy said.

Klench gulped. 'Oh.'

'And you answered,' Mrs Winther finished. 'Giving your name and business. Did you want to change your plea at this stage?'

Klench did look at Linn now. He looked at her vacant smile, her smiling eyes, her carefree swinging legs. He looked at how young she was, at how happy she was, at how Innocent she

was. She stared back at him, apparently oblivious to any problem. She smiled at him. And that did it.

‘No,’ he said. His voice was firmer, stronger now. He was feeling more in control. They would get nothing from him.

Mrs Winther sighed. It was a sound of resignation rather than surprise. ‘Time for you to explain things to Mr Klench, Nikole,’ she said to the young woman.

The woman was holding a briefcase. Klench had not noticed it before. But his attention was fixed on it now as she lifted it on to the desk - on to his desk. She opened it, and swung it round just enough for him to see the array of instruments and devices inside.

And his stomach turned to water.

CHAPTER 10

She had never noticed before how lovely the office was. She had always treated it merely as a room, as a place where she and Klensch worked. But in fact there was a kind of beauty in every aspect of it. The way the smudges on the windows dispersed the light; the way the light shining through the smeary windows caught the motes of dust as they spiralled down; the way the furniture was so haphazardly arranged. Everything.

Linn Sekka was happy to just sit and watch and swing her legs. She hummed quietly, enjoying the sound of her own voice - when she could hear it above the screams.

They were really very good screams. Obviously there was nothing really wrong. They were cries, surely, of joy rather than pain or discomfort. She could not see what the woman was doing to Klensch, but no doubt it was for his own good. He was a sad man, she knew, and anything that could help him was for the best.

One of the large men, the younger one that they had called Powlo, turned to look at her. His expression seemed to be puzzled. Linn smiled at him, and was pleased to see that he smiled thinly back.

Such nice people.

They held a quick council of war.

‘OK,’ Jason summarized, ‘we can’t really tell what the situation is without seeing for ourselves. So you head back mill have a shifty, while I follow Benny and Harper and keep them out of trouble.’

Clarence nodded. ‘I think I understand,’ he said. ‘We are swapping roles.’

‘Yes. Partly because Winther and her thugs know me now, and we didn’t part on the most amicable of terms. And also,’

he said, 'you're better equipped for looking into upper-storey windows than I am.'

Clarence thought about this. 'Benny said to Klensch that they were taking the ferry to Prevorica,' he said. 'Shall I meet you there?'

'It's a big place,' Jason said. 'Better to meet at the hotel. If I need help, I'll call the Xcelsior and leave you a message.'

'Right.' Clarence smiled. 'I must fly,' he said.

'Ah, humour,' Jason replied without smiling. 'Good. Very impressive. Very original. What are you tackling next?'

'Sarcasm,' Clarence said. 'Benny tells me it is the highest form of wit.'

'He's getting there,' Jason murmured to himself as he watched Clarence push his way back through the crowds. 'Still a bit obvious, but he's getting there.'

'He'll die before he talks,' Luggar said.

Mrs Winther nodded. She had come to the same conclusion. Nikole hesitated, bloody scalpel in hand. Behind her, Klensch was slumped forward in his chair. His wrists were strapped to the arms of the chair, his belt was wound through the slatted back and tight round his huge waist.

'Shall I stop?' Nikole asked.

Mrs Winther considered. 'If he isn't going to tell us anything, there's no point in going on,' she said slowly. 'But equally there's no point in stopping either.' She turned to Luggar. 'What other options do we have?'

Luggar nodded to the woman sitting swinging her legs on the table. 'She might know something,' he said. 'But I wouldn't bet on it.'

'She's gone,' Powlo offered. 'Tripped out.'

'Or just naturally stupid,' Mrs Winther said. 'No, leave her. For now anyway.'

Nikole set down the scalpel in a steel kidney dish. 'What about Doctor Creer?' she suggested. 'Could he help us?'

'Creer only works on dead people,' Luggar growled.

There was silence for several seconds, broken only by the quiet humming of the woman and the barely conscious moans of pain from Klensch.

‘That’s easily sorted,’ Nikole said. She picked up the scalpel again.

‘No, wait.’ Mrs Winther held up her hand. ‘We need everything. Every ounce of his memory. So his brain has to be perfectly preserved.’

‘We bring Creer to him, bring him here,’ Luggar said ‘And don’t kill him till Creer’s arrived.’

From the Journal of Bernice Summerfield

Since Virabilis seemed to be little more than a tourist trap despite all Dent’s protestations about how dangerous and lawless it really was, I was hoping for a little more excitement from Prevorla. Fat chance.

I think maybe they work on a different level in this part of the universe. What’s seen as a big deal here is small potatoes back where I come from. A major hazard to life is comparable to crossing the road back home. Actually, crossing the road is one of the more adventurous things you can indulge in here.

Even finding Dorpfeld’s Prism turned out to be fairly straightforward. I know Dent is always on about how someone is after it, or after us, or after everything. But it simply isn’t like that. He’s just paranoid. He sees danger lurking round every corner and under every street lamp. I guess it makes for an interesting new interpretation of his books and traveller’s tales.

But I’m different. I pride myself on my ability to take things as they are. As they *really* are. I guess after so many adventures, Dent has had to create this sort of mythical world in his head where men whisper of danger and excitement. Unfortunately that’s all they do.

So, anyway, a trip out to Prevorla on the Star Ferry looked like the easiest, cheapest, quickest way to get to where the action really is.

On the way Dent regaled me with various accounts of how surly and insular the natives are once you're outside Prevoria City. I was quite looking forward to wandering round a shanty village with houses on stilts and children peering at us suspiciously through windows their parents have told them to keep closed on pain of, well, pain. He made them out to be a reclusive people, not used even now to outsiders. Natives of a bygone age who will slit your throat for the clothes you wear or if they think you're looking at them in a funny way.

It all sounded familiar, exciting and adventurous.

Because, at heart, that's what I am. An adventuress.

The Star Ferry was a less than auspicious start, which I sort of thought probably boded well. It was run down, smelly, slow and downright dangerous. OK, so I was longing for some danger, but not of the 'airlock cracks, atmosphere escapes and we-all-die-gasping-horribly-for-breath-as-the-ship-breaks-apart' sort. Oh no.

I exaggerate. Slightly. In fact, Prevoria and Virabilis are so close together that there's atmosphere all the way. It gets a bit thin in the middle part of the journey, but it's there. You don't need to be pressurized, and the ferry isn't. So there's a ten-minute chunk of the journey where everyone sits down and keeps quiet. The hard men try to keep on their feet to show how macho they are. The result is, they faint. Fortunately Dent didn't attempt this, though I bet he has in the past. If I wasn't with him, I'd have tried it. Maybe.

The view from the side of the ferry, what you can see of it through the smog-haze that is, is pretty spectacular. There's something awe-inspiring about the sight of Prevoria so low in the sky above you from Virabilis anyway. As you get closer to it, the sight is even more impressive. Until you get close enough to make out the detail and can see that it's just another smelly, dirty, overdeveloped city. But by then you can look back at Virabilis and be impressed with that. Even though you know what it's like down there really.

If you look sideways you can see the stars. At least, when the atmosphere is thin they're just about visible. Stars in daylight, now that is something.

But then you're back into the smog. Or at least, you're into Prevorja's own smog. Not that there's any difference. The stars dwindle and die and you immediately feel less poetic and less impressed.

The ferry port was a riot. People milling about in their hundreds if not thousands. Live animals, too. Thank goodness they're transported below decks. The smell is bad enough as it is, without coping with livestock and all their associated bodily functions. Dent says there's a roaring trade in animals between Prevorja and Virabilis. 'Like lions, you mean?' I said, but he didn't seem to get the joke. I thought of taking him aside and quizzing him about whether he just didn't notice it was a joke or whether he didn't consider it funny. But that would have destroyed any possibility of using it again later. Anyway, he was more concerned with finding us a ride out into what he optimistically described as the primitive outlands.

But I was taken in, of course. I anticipated the excitement of the visit to a genuine native settlement all the way. It took my mind off the condition of the ground car we hitched a ride in and the general demeanour of the driver.

The journey was unremarkable, except that, although the crazy who'd given us a lift seemed intent on breaking the sound barrier as well as driving through every rut and pothole he could find, we were overtaken. On a bend, going up a hill on what I would have sworn was a single-track lane and with a sheer drop on one side, we were overtaken. This ground car just streaked past. Big one, hire job. Whiz.

Just goes to show, there's always someone more crazy about no matter how impossible that might seem at the time.

Our lift dropped us about two miles from the village, I guess. So we had a short walk. Dent spent most of it stressing how we had to approach quietly, keep our hands visible, make no threatening gestures, and above all be polite and deferential to anyone we did meet.

‘Remember,’ he said for the thousand and seventh time, ‘they’re a shy people, unused to strangers. They struggle to survive out here so don’t pick up anything, or even look at a piece of food in case they think you’re after it. They’d kill you for an apple.’

By this time we could see the village in the distance. It was built round the edge of a lake, which I presumed provided water for the inhabitants. The houses were made of sheets of metal, crude plasterwork, anything I guess that was to hand. They came right down to the limit of the land, standing on stilts over the edge of the water. They rose quite high above the water level, so I suppose that the lake rises during the rainy season. If there is one. At least we seemed to have left the near-constant drizzle behind on Virabilis.

The houses were all square, I suppose because of the way they were built and the materials used. There was not a soul in sight and I believed Dent’s story about the natives being shy and retiring without a second thought. There was a silence in the air which you could cut with a knife. Except that would have made too much noise.

We made our way round the shore of the lake, the water lapping gently at the stony beach. Something to do with the gravitational effect of Virabilis being so close, Dent said. The water was beautifully clear. We managed to get to what seemed to be the main street of the village without seeing anyone, or we believed being seen ourselves.

The streets were paved, after a fashion, with slabs of concrete. Weeds grew through the cracks between the slabs. The side of the road was edged with a low stucco wall. Occasionally there were a couple of steps up to it. I could imagine the village children climbing up and walking precariously along its top while ignoring their parents’ pleas to be careful and come down at once before they fell.

Close up you could see just how ramshackle and makeshift the buildings really were. Dent wasn’t fibbing, it seemed, when he talked about the poverty and subsistence-level lives of the people here. I could believe that if we ever saw anyone they would be emaciated, tired farmers and labourers,

fishermen perhaps, eking out a humdrum existence without entertainment, art or any diversions except maybe rough alcohol.

'It's so quiet,' I whispered to Dent as we turned a corner in the street.

That was the point at which the band started up.

The noise was as sudden as it was unexpected. I suppose we should have been grateful that it was produced mainly by local wind instruments and home-made steel drums rather than the full military brass-band job, but even so we were startled, then amazed, then perplexed.

Dent was even more surprised than I was at this turn of events. He stared at the thronging villagers saying incredulously 'I don't understand' over and over again.

The whole village must have been there, from babes in arms up to the Oldest Citizen on gnarled sticks. They had strewn leaves across the concrete pavement and were holding out baskets of fruit and flowers. My first thought was that we had strayed into the middle of some local festival, but this was dispelled immediately.

He must have been the head man of the village - mayor, tribal chief, whatever. He had several garlands of flowers round his neck and he was the one who looked like he was allowed decent servings at dinner. He strode up to Dent and me. We shrank back, still on the oops-interrupted-religious-occasion kick.

When he was just about within reach he suddenly dived forwards and kissed me on each cheek. I was almost as surprised as Dent was when he got the same treatment. Then the chief took one of the garlands of flowers from round his neck and put it over my head. Again Dent got the same.

After that we were led along the leaf-strewn path, waved at by the local people, greeted enthusiastically by the local dignitaries, and offered fruit by the children. They didn't seem to speak a word we understood, everything being conveyed in grunts and murmurs and nods and gestures.

But the meaning was as clear as if they had hung out bunting and huge printed banners with the slogan, 'OUR VILLAGE WELCOMES BERNICE SUMMERFIELD'.

'Have you ever actually been to one of these native villages before?' I asked Dent as sweetly as I could as we sat on wooden thrones watching a traditional dance by ladies of the village who balanced baskets of fish on their heads and wiggled their stomachs in ways that suggested access to a fully equipped gymnasium.

He shook his head in continuing disbelief. 'I don't understand,' he said again. His voice was quiet and strangely pathetic. I patted his hand and let him watch the dance.

'Not quite what I was expecting from your description,' I confessed. 'But I suppose it makes for an interesting diversion.'

The evening was drawing in when we left. It seemed to take forever to say goodbye to all the people who lined the streets to watch us go. Maybe they were never visited by strangers, or perhaps they were just in a generous mood that day. I'd given up trying to figure it out. They must have seen us making our cautious way round the lake and set up their whole festival at a moment's notice. But, whatever was behind it, I was again struck by the generosity and plain friendliness of everyone.

And, after about ten minutes, by how boring it really all was.

It was a long walk back. We were relying on catching a lift from a passer-by, but we had to walk for several miles before we were lucky enough to hitch a ride in a cattle truck. We had been passed after only a short way by what looked like the same hire car as had streaked by us on our way there. Again it screeched past without even slowing down Dent had been standing in the road waving for it to stop, but jumped aside just in time.

(Extract ends)

They kept Klench barely conscious until Creer arrived. The doctor was not impressed, but seeing what had happened to Klench he did not seem inclined to complain too vociferously.

‘This is highly irregular, you know,’ he grumbled as he set up his equipment. It took him several minutes to sort out the cabling so that the images could be relayed to the security monitor. ‘You won’t get a terribly good picture on that, you know,’ he pointed out. ‘Everything done on the cheap these days.’

‘I think it’s a lovely picture,’ Linn remarked to nobody in particular. ‘I’ve always liked it.’ She tilted her head to one side and stared at the monitor.

‘Who is this?’ Creer asked, pointing at Linn.

‘Ignore her,’ Powlo advised. ‘She’s wacko.’

‘Get her out of here then,’ Creer snapped. ‘No wackos allowed. This is a serious operation, not a circus show.’ He snapped the fingers of his surgical gloves and flexed his hands. ‘Right, now let’s be having that brain.’

Nikole smiled. ‘With pleasure.’

As the lift doors opened, Linn turned back just for a moment. Her face became a picture of rapture, and Creer looked round to see what she was looking at. There was nothing, just the greasy window giving out on to the uninspiring cityscape, and the body slumped forward over the desk.

He took the brain from Nikole, feeling the warmth of it through his thin gloves, and set it carefully on a steel plate beside the monitor.

‘Right then,’ Creer said, ‘let’s see what we have here, shall we?’

It was a beautiful day. Things could not be better. Linn wandered aimlessly for several minutes, just enjoying being alive, feeling the breath of the breeze on her face, basking in the beauty of the day.

Klench was dead. She knew that. She had seen what had happened to him, although the manner of it had rather passed her by. But that was a good thing too. She did not

pretend to understand the man, but she had liked him. And she had known him well enough to know that deep down, fundamentally, he was not happy with life.

So being dead was really the best thing for him. It was all so simple when you thought about it. He was in a better place now. He was happy.

She was absolutely sure of that. After all, when she had looked back into the room she had seen an angel at the window. Watching over him. Ready to take his soul up to the heavens while his worldly body enjoyed its well-deserved rest.

As she thought about this, Linn looked up at the sky, shielding her eyes from the brilliance of the sun. In the distance she could see the Star Ferry making its way majestically down from Prevorla towards Virabilis. She watched it for a while, a tiny dot, so far away. Who had said they were going on the Star Ferry? she wondered.

Then she remembered, and for the first time a tiny niggles of less-than-perfection edged into her way of thinking. Her hand went to her throat and closed on the silver chain hidden beneath the collar of her blouse. Professor Summerfield. It was Professor Summerfield.

And Jericko Klench owed her money. And now he would not be able to pay. That was wrong, Linn knew. It was unfair. And she determined to do something about it, to restore her world to the paradise of perfection it so nearly was.

On reflection, Nikole was not surprised that she was the only one who realized what it was.

Creer was fussing round his equipment, making adjustments and altering settings. But the image remained the same.

‘That’s it,’ he admitted at last. ‘That seems to be the single image that he was concentrating on for a good while before his death.’

‘But it’s...’ Mrs Winther waved a pudgy hand. ‘Apart from Dorpfeld’s Prism, what is it?’

Powlo and Luggar were both shaking their heads.

Creer was staring at the screen, biting his lower lip. 'Some sort of fabric membrane?' he suggested. He traced the outline of the grainy image. 'I imagine you were asking him where this Prism is. He is visualizing the hiding place.'

'Two hills, covered in snow?' Luggar hazarded. But Dorpfeld's Prism would be huge. And what's the raised area round the edge of the chain?'

'It's a collar,' Nikole said.

There was silence. Slowly everyone turned to look at her.

She sighed and traced her finger down the middle of the screen. 'Have you never seen cleavage before? It's a picture of someone wearing Dorpfeld's Prism. Round their neck,' she added. Then in case there was still any doubt: 'A woman. A young woman by the look of it.' She tried not to glance at Mrs Winther's sagging but voluminous bosom as she said this.

'So,' Mrs Winther said, 'we need to find a woman. Nikole, you're a treasure.'

'A woman Klench knew well enough to entrust Dorpfeld's Prism to,' Luggar said.

'A woman wearing a white blouse,' Creer added thoughtfully.

'With long auburn hair, by the look of it,' Mrs Winther said as she stared sideways at the screen.

'Who also hums tunelessly and swings her legs about?' Nikole suggested. 'Who Powlo just evicted on the advice of Doctor Creer?'

'Wacko,' Powlo said heavily.

But his comment was drowned out by Mrs Winther's shout of anger and outrage.

'It cost me a fortune in fruit and veg,' Jason said ruefully. 'But they really went for the Princess Bernice of Dellah bit.'

They stood in the shadow of a dilapidated office block, watching the passengers as they emerged from the ferry terminal.

'I could have bought the ground car for less,' Jason went on. 'They saw me coming, and I didn't have time to haggle.'

‘There she is.’ Clarence pointed through the crowd to where Benny and Harper were pushing their way forwards. Harper was shaking his head; Benny looked less than enthusiastic about life.

‘Plum?’ Jason offered. ‘I’ve got a pocketful. One of the perks of the job.’

‘Thanks, but no,’ Clarence said as they started to follow Benny and Harper. ‘What are the other perks?’

Jason shouldered aside a beggar who was thrusting a rusty tin under his nose and pushed past a woman carrying rancid fish. ‘I’ll let you know,’ he said.

‘I don’t understand it,’ Dent said as they made their way through the crowds from the ferry.

‘Look,’ Benny told him, ‘will you stop saying “I don’t understand it” and just accept it. Your impression of village life on Prevorica was slightly... awry. That’s all.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And I don’t understand it.’

Benny ignored him and put her head down to push through the mass of people. After what seemed like an age, she emerged into daylight. Dent was close behind her and pointed the way.

‘We could get a taxi,’ he suggested.

‘I’m less impressed with the taxis than with the local knowledge,’ Benny huffed as she set off at a brisk pace. ‘The Xcelsior is this way,’ she called over her shoulder to Dent.

‘Excuse me. Professor Summerfield?’

Benny paused. The voice was familiar, and yet strange. She turned towards it, and found that Linn Sekka was beside her. Her hands were clasped in front of her chest and she almost danced for joy when she saw that Benny had heard her and stopped.

‘Oh, hello,’ Benny said.

Dent had joined them. He looked suspiciously at Linn but said nothing.

‘What is it?’ Benny asked when it became apparent that Linn was not about to offer anything else.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, looking down at the ground. ‘I really am. I feel so awful.’ She sounded as if she really did.

She sounded so upset that Benny was tempted to put her mm round her and lead her to the nearest seat. But she couldn’t see a seat. And she recalled how rude the woman usually was to her. So she didn’t. Instead she waited for further explanation.

‘Don’t tell us you can’t pay!’ Dent said in obvious mock surprise.

When Linn looked up, her face was actually streaked with tears. ‘Oh, Mr Harper,’ she sobbed. ‘I really am so sorry. Really.’

Really.’ He did not sound so convinced.

‘It’s wrong, I know, and there’s nothing I can do about it,’ Linn went on, wiping her eyes. ‘I’m sorry to have put you to all this trouble for us, but there’s only one thing I can do.’

As she spoke she reached inside her collar and lifted a silver chain over her head. She held out Dorpfeld’s Prism to Benny. It swung slowly in front of her, catching and reflecting the light from deep inside the cut crystal.

‘Take it,’ Linn said as Benny hesitated. ‘It’s yours really, you know.’

For a moment they both held it together. For a moment they both smiled at each other - open, honest, completely artless smiles of pure happiness and generosity.

Then Linn let go of the chain. Abruptly she blinked and took a step backwards. Then her hand went to her mouth and she gave a small choking sound. ‘Oh God,’ she said, ‘he’s -’ Then she turned, eyes wide, and ran.

Dent watched her go. ‘Strange woman,’ he remarked. ‘Don’t you think?’

‘She’s so kind and thoughtful,’ Benny said dreamily. She was wearing the Prism round her neck now, tucking it inside her shirt. She looked round in apparent amazement as she did. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘what a beautiful day. How absolutely divine. Let’s walk.’

She reached out and took Dent's hand. Together they set off through the litter scattered across the pavement, past the beggars and into the thickening drizzle.

She was distinctive enough that, with a little persuasion, Nikole and Powlo were able to track Linn Sekka to the Star Ferry port. The place was teeming with people since a ferry had just arrived. Their first thought was that the woman was trying to escape in the outbound ferry to Prevorla. But, even as they pushed through to the front of the queue, they spotted her running in the opposite direction.

She had not seen them. She just seemed to be running aimlessly. Running for the sake of it. For something to do

When they caught up with her, Nikole was struck by the contrast with how she had been at Klensch's office. She was no longer dreamy, detached and innocent. She was wild-eyed, scared and upset.

Powlo grabbed her, pinning her arms behind her back as Nikole tore open her blouse. There was nothing inside. At least, nothing they had been specifically looking for.

'OK, where is it?' Nikole demanded.

Powlo pulled her arms further up her back to make the point.

Her expression showed it was a point taken. 'I haven't got it,' she said, almost in tears. 'Let me go, will you?'

'Maybe,' Powlo said in her ear.

She tried to pull away, but Powlo dragged her closer, pinning her tightly to him.

'I said, where is it?' Nikole said fiercely, right into her face.

'And I said I haven't got it.'

'Take her brain out?' Powlo suggested. 'Like with her boss?' He stared down at her from behind, over her shoulder. 'I dunno where her brains might be, but I'm happy to look for them.' He guffawed with laughter at his joke.

Linn was terrified at the thought.

Nikole was unimpressed. 'Grow up,' she snarled at Powlo. She reached out and slapped the man hard across the face.

Then she turned her attention back to Linn. 'Now,' she said, almost gently, 'where is Dorpfeld's Prism?'

Linn said nothing. She stuck her chin out defiantly.

Nikole shrugged. 'I am a frail young woman,' she said, nodding at Powlo. 'I cannot keep this animal's hands off you for ever.' She leant closer. 'Tell me what I want to know.'

Linn stared back, her eyes narrowed. Then she sagged slightly in Powlo's grip. 'All right,' she said. 'I don't want it anyway. You're welcome to it. It's...' She struggled to think of a description. 'It's not a good thing to have,' she said at last. 'You wouldn't understand.' She made a brave attempt at a smile. 'But you will.'

'So where is it?' Powlo grunted.

She twisted her head slightly in an effort to see him. 'I said I don't have it.'

'Then who does?' Nikole snapped.

'Professor Summerfield. I gave it to Professor Summerfield.'

Nikole looked into the woman's eyes, deep into her eyes as if she could determine her veracity from within. She nodded to Powlo, who let go of her.

Linn rubbed her arms, trying to work the circulation back into life. 'Thank you.' She gave a short sharp laugh. 'I thought you were going to kill me.'

'We may yet,' Nikole admitted. 'If you were lying.'

'A strange way to behave,' Linn said with renewed bravado. 'After all, it's if I'm telling the truth that I'm expendable.'

Nikole regarded her for a moment. 'We're professionals,' she said. 'We reward those who help us. It means we can continue to rely on them. But we punish those who are against us. Remember that.' There was an edge to her voice, a threat that Linn did not miss.

'I will,' she said. 'I'm a professional too,' she added. 'You'll find Summerfield at the Xcelsior.'

CHAPTER 11

It was a long walk back to the hotel. By the time they reached the market area, it was dark. The narrow streets were lit by the startling, flickering neon of shop signs and the hazy fuzz of the street lights battling through the heavy smog.

Dent was used to walking, and as ever there seemed to be no trouble. So he was in a relaxed mood as they worked their way past the first of the market stalls that sprawled out from the central hub of the Xcelsior. Benny had laughed at his joke, which was slightly unusual, and she had seemed to appreciate his stories as much as she had when they first met. It seemed as if he had known the happy, smiling woman all his life despite the fact they had met only a couple of days before.

But, however relaxed he was, Dent Harper was the sort of person who noticed immediately when something was wrong. And he did.

‘What is it?’ Benny asked as Dent stopped and looked round.

‘It’s quiet,’ he replied.

‘Yes. Nice, isn’t it?’

‘Mmm.’ He wasn’t convinced. ‘The stalls are all set out. It’s not that late.’

‘So?’

‘So where are the traders, the stallholders?’ Dent looked along the deserted street. ‘Come to that, where are the customers?’

Benny shrugged. ‘It’s a lovely evening - perhaps they’ve gone for a walk.’

‘Yeah, right. Just left their wares and wandered off for a quiet drink.’ He was still looking round warily. ‘Very likely.’

‘Well there you are, then,’ Benny said as if that settled it. She put her arm through Dent’s and led him onward.

He stopped again almost immediately. It was indeed incredibly quiet. The only sounds were away in the distance. Except for the rattle of a stone on the street off to their left. Dent looked to where the sound had come from. They were level with a side alley, and he could see along it. At the end of the alley was parked a ground car. It was large and black with tinted windows. As he watched, a small stone bounced off the side of the car and clattered to the ground.

If Dent had been interested in the stone, he might have wondered who had thrown it. It might have occurred to him that someone had thrown it deliberately to attract his attention. But he was staring at the ground car. He had seen a ground car like that recently. He had seen a ground car like that somewhere. Somewhere with Benny.

'Landfill Major,' he said out loud. And even as his mind worked through the implications of this he was dragging Benny after him. 'Run,' he shouted, but his legs were already ahead of his mouth.

'I like exercise,' Benny said as they ran. 'Are we in a hurry?'

'Yes,' Dent screamed back at her. He had to shout to make himself heard above the sound of gunfire.

Chips of the pavement were flying up behind them as they ran, edging their way nearer. Dent hurled himself down a side street, pulling Benny after him. He pressed himself against the wall and held Benny close to him. 'We have to get to the hotel,' he whispered.

'I know.' For once her tone was serious. 'The pub's been open for hours,' she explained.

'Come on.' Dent pushed himself away from the wall and they were off again, running as fast as Dent could drag Benny. Heading for the end of the street. Behind them the area round the part of the wall they had been pressed against exploded in a spectacular orange fireball. The flames chased along the street, licking at Dent's heels as he dived forward, pushing Benny ahead of him.

They both stopped abruptly. Across the road, past the market stalls, was the back entrance to the hotel. The doorway was lit by a neon sign. Some of the letter lights had

failed and it proudly proclaimed, 'XCE S OR'. Between them and the doorway, standing beside one of the market stalls, was the smaller of the two men who had led them across Landfill Major to Mrs Winther's ground car. He was holding a gun, and, as Dent watched, the gun was raised to point straight at him.

A second later, he heard the sound of the shot.

In the hope that Benny would be less likely to recognize Clarence, they had agreed that he should go on ahead and wait in the hotel lobby for Harper and Benny to arrive. Jason shadowed the two as they made their way back from the ferry port.

Since he knew that Mrs Winther would be after Linn, and that Linn would have no qualms about telling her where Dorpfeld's Prism now was, Jason was expecting trouble. He noticed as soon as Harper did that the streets were deserted, and it was not an especially mind-taxing task to work out what had scared the locals away. People with guns, at a guess. Probably lots of people. Probably lots of guns.

Jason's problem now was to alert Benny and Harper to the danger without giving himself away. When he found Mrs Winther's limo, and saw that Harper and Benny were approaching the alleyway it was parked at the end of, he had the idea of throwing stones at it. It just might work, if the two were on the ball. And, even if it didn't, he at least got the satisfaction of chucking stones at Mrs Winther's car.

As it was, Harper seemed to realize the danger, and he and Benny legged it just ahead of the bullets. They seemed to be making for the back door to the Xcelsior Hotel, which was not, Jason had to admit, a bad plan. By cutting through a cross-street he got there just ahead of them.

And saw Fronz standing waiting, gun at the ready. He raised the gun, pointing it at Benny and Harper. From where Jason was standing he could see the thin smile of satisfaction on Fronz's face as he took aim.

Jason took less time aiming. He was, after all close to his target. A single shot to the head was more than sufficient and

Fronz was spun round by the unexpected impact before spiralling to the wet pavement. His arm flailed out, catching the side of a stall as he fell, sending a pile of metal pans crashing noisily to the ground.

Harper looked round in surprise. Benny seemed not to notice what was happening. In a moment Harper was dragging her towards the hotel, pausing only to scoop up Fronz's gun and stuff it into his jacket pocket.

'Over to you, Clarence,' Jason murmured and he watch the door close behind them. He waited in the shadow expecting at any moment to hear the sound of running footsteps.

The door opened into a corridor, which led past several conference rooms and back into the hotel foyer. The conference rooms were locked, so there was little choice but to follow the corridor.

'You know,' Benny said pulling away from Dent's grip for a moment, 'I never noticed the pattern in this carpet before. Isn't it pretty?'

Dent did not reply. He was beginning to think she had taken the 'I'm cool' act as far as it would sensibly go. And then some. He grabbed her hand again and dragged her on. 'They'll be after us in a moment,' he told her. 'I don't know who took out the guy at the door, but someone's on our side.'

'Mmm,' Benny murmured in reply. 'He looked so peaceful, didn't he?'

They paused at the end of the corridor. There was no door: it just gave out into the central foyer. There were people, though not many, which was a good sign, Dent reckoned. Not enough to get lost in the crowd, but maybe enough to serve as a distraction and a deterrent to the most extreme use of force.

As he edged cautiously out of the corridor, pulling Benny behind him, a man walked briskly past. He turned his face away as he approached, as if not wanting it to be seen. But Dent had already noticed the dark, floppy moustache.

'Wait here a moment,' Dent instructed Benny. He let go of her hand and moved quickly after the man.

The whisper carried easily to Dent. The man did not slow or pause as he hissed, 'Two of them. One on the mezzanine floor above us, the other by the main doors.'

Dent whirled round immediately, turning a full circle, and remarking the two men. They were easily spotted, once you knew where to look. Dark suits, black ties, hands inside bulging jackets.

'Thanks,' Dent said quietly.

The man had paused in an alcove where there was a low table with a house communicator resting on it.

Dent blocked him in for a moment. 'Who are you?' he demanded. 'I've seen you several times.'

'A friend,' the man said simply. 'You'd better get back to Benny. Don't mention me.'

Dent nodded. Then, as he turned to go, a thought struck him. 'I'd ditch the obviously false moustache, if I were you,' he said.

The man looked hurt at the idea. Dent sighed, and reached out. He was in the mood to make a point.

'I'm terribly sorry,' he admitted a moment later. 'I do apologize. Really.'

Dent edged his way back round the wall to where Benny was waiting. They were at the periphery of both the gunmen's view. With luck they wouldn't be spotted. But there was no way they could stay by the corridor. There was no knowing who might come along it at any moment. The dead man outside certainly had colleagues who would soon be entering the hotel to join their comrades inside. If they didn't move, it would not be long before Dent and Benny would find themselves caught between the two.

'This pattern goes right the way through, look,' Benny said as Dent returned. 'It's picked up by the marble tiles on the floor across to the doors and the reception desk.' She smiled in evident appreciation. 'It's really neat. Clever. Don't you think?'

'What? Er, yes,' Dent admitted. 'Look, can we talk about it later?'

‘If you like.’ Benny nodded. ‘I think our best move would be the pub.’

Dent considered. She was probably right. It was certainly defensible, and there could be another way out. In the worst case there would be people inside. ‘Good thought. But how do we get there?’ He pointed out the two hit men. ‘They’ll see us as soon as we break cover.’

Benny shook her head. ‘You’re so melodramatic at times,’ she said. ‘Does it matter?’

‘It does if they can shoot straight.’ He looked round. ‘We need a distraction for a moment. Then we can run for it.* He looked round. Through the main doors to the hotel he could see that the rain had picked up. It was splashing heavily into the existing puddles, making new ones, running away in little streams towards the clogged gutters. ‘It’s raining,’ he said.

‘Nice for the flowers.’

Then he had it. Not the world’s best plan, but it was better than no plan at all. ‘I know,’ he told Benny. ‘Pretend we’ve just dashed in from the rain.’

She looked at him sideways, as if he needed humouring. ‘All right,’ she said in an I’m-game voice.

‘Pull your jacket over your head as if you’ve just run in and were using it as an umbrella.’ He demonstrated, to Benny’s obvious amusement. ‘Like this.’

‘Is this the distraction you mentioned?’ she laughed.

He almost laughed too. Then he saw what was happening on the mezzanine. ‘No,’ he said. ‘That is.’

The hit man on the mezzanine floor was leaning over the rails. He had caught sight of them and was straining to see Benny and Dent better. It was only a moment now before he would raise the alarm. But that was not what Dent had meant. Behind the man, as he leant forward. Dent had caught sight of another figure. A moustachioed face turned into the light for a split second. A moment later the hit man gave a wild cry as his feet were lifted from the floor under him and he pitched forward, scrabbling desperately at the guard rail.

He was still scrabbling as he fell. It was as if he were trying to swim in the air, pushing and struggling to grab the wind rushing past him.

‘Now,’ Dent said. ‘Run.’

‘Must be the cabaret,’ Benny mused as Dent grabbed her.

They sprinted across the foyer, coats pulled over their heads, faces hidden within. Somewhere off to their left there was a loud thud followed by screaming and running feet. They paid it no heed. Dent shouldered open the door into the pub area, knocking a young woman flying as he did so.

‘I’m sorry about my clumsy friend,’ Benny helped the woman back to her feet as the door closed behind them.

‘I think we made it,’ Dent said. He was looking back through a crack in the door. With a long breath of relief he turned back to Benny.

The young woman was dusting herself down. She was tall and slim, with dark hair - almost black but with a hint of red in it, cut quite short and slicked back. She was holding a small handgun.

‘I was going to apologize,’ Dent said as he slowly raised his hands. ‘Really I was.’

‘That’s all right,’ the woman said. ‘You can apologize to Mrs Winther.’ Her face broke into an unpleasant smile.

As she smiled, Dent was still raising his hands. They were now level with his shoulders. Quick as thought, he lashed out with his right arm, catching the woman’s gun hand and dragging it upward. The shot crashed into the ceiling sending splinters of plaster spinning off into space. For a moment they struggled, arms locked together.

‘Open the door, Benny,’ Dent shouted. ‘The lady’s leaving.’

‘Of course.’ With a polite smile, Benny pulled the door open.

As soon as she did so, Dent flung the woman away from him. She spun through the door, with a cry, collapsing in a heap on the other side. Her gun clattered to the marble floor and skidded away from her.

Immediately the door had swung shut. Dent grabbed the nearest table and pushed it up against the door. He threw a

couple of chairs after it. Then he turned round and leant against the makeshift barricade.

This position gave him a good view into the bar. It was as if time had stopped. The barman was frozen in mid-glass-polish. The drinkers were standing or sitting absolutely still, glasses at mouths, en route to mouths, or resting in disbelieving hands. Common to everyone was the open-mouthed expression of surprise.

The silence was broken by a single voice. 'Do you have any Craxatonian Chardonnay?' Benny asked. 'Oh, and those little heart-and club-shaped biscuits that taste of cheese?'

There was a limit to what Clarence could do. He wasn't sure of the ethics or the morality of pushing a man over a balcony. But he was sure about what would have happened to Benny and her friend Harper if he hadn't.

As far as he could tell, the second of the gunmen had rushed to his colleague's help and not seen Benny and Harper dash across the foyer under cover of their coats and the confusion caused by the man's fall. Clarence hoped that meant they would be safe now. But even as he hoped this the door to the pub area opened again and a young woman with a gun was thrown out.

Clarence's first inclination was to rush down and drag her away before she could raise the alarm. Since he recognized the woman from his surveillance of Klench's office, he knew she was with the Cartel. But before he could move the main doors of the hotel opened and Mrs Winther waddled in. Beside her was Luggar. They went at once to where the woman was getting to her feet. The hit man joined them a moment later.

Clarence watched the hurried gesticulation and enthusiastic arm waving. The woman was pointing to the door of the pub. The hit man was pointing to the prone body of his fellow. Both seemed to be talking at once.

The only thing Clarence was sure of now was that he wanted to see Jason. But a few moments later he was not so sure.

Fronz was down. Powlo could see that immediately he approached the kill zone. He had been expecting to see the Summerfield woman and Harper sprawled across the pavement, Fronz standing astride his trophies. That had been the plan - drive them through the side street with the promise of a safe haven, straight to Fronz.

But instead Fronz was himself lying face down in the rain. His cheek was pressed hard against the concrete, one eye staring out across the road. His clothes were soaked and there was a red-rimmed hole drilled in the side of his head. Even Doctor Creer, Powlo reflected, would have been disappointed with him in this condition.

A quick inspection was enough to reveal that Fronz's gun was missing. So, if Harper and Summerfield had not been armed before, they certainly were now. Powlo nudged the side of Fronz's body with the toe of his boot. Beside him, two other large-built men in suits watched impassively.

As he was turning to talk to his colleagues, Powlo took a step sideways. This was why the bullet missed him. It whistled past his nose, and embedded itself with a healthy 'thunk' in the roadway beyond. The sound was deafening in the still of the evening, deadened only by the persistent rain.

At once all three of them dived for cover. One of the men pointed towards the doorway into the Xcelsior. 'Over there,' he shouted. 'Muzzle flash.'

All three of them fired in the general direction. The side of the hotel, in particular the area immediately round the door, exploded in puffs of brickwork and paint. A single shot was returned, from a way to the left of where they were aiming. As they shifted their aim and fired again, a dark figure leapt out of the way and dived through the door into the hotel.

'Wait,' Powlo shouted as the other two men made to follow. 'That wasn't Harper. There may be others.' He rose cautiously from his hiding place. 'Cover me,' he said, though he wasn't sure what use that would be if anyone did shoot him.

It took Powlo only a few seconds to determine that he was not about to be shot. Then the three of them were running

towards the door into the hotel. One of the men slipped on the wet pavement, stumbling forward through the increasing rain. The other one opened the door for Powlo. Guns at the ready, they made their way along the corridor inside.

The public-address system in the hotel was good, Dent had to admit. He could make out every word quite clearly. Not like that time he had missed his connecting shuttle because he could not decipher a single word the Actinian announcer had said. And his Actinian was actually quite good. He had learnt it doing a self-study course in the evenings while exploring the desert region of Margoginus Three. No, he was forced to admit, as PA systems went this one was right up there with the best of them.

So it was a shame really about what was being said. Benny didn't seem to care, sitting on a high stool at the bar with a bottle of wine in front of her, sipping from a large glass. But everyone else was listening with rapt attention.

'So,' the voice that recognizably belonged to Mrs Winther finished by saying, 'anyone who wishes to leave the pub now will not be harmed. I repeat, you will be allowed to go. That does not apply of course to Mr Harper or Professor Summerfield unless they wish to surrender to me the goods I require.' There was a pause - probably for effect, Dent thought, since she would already know what she wanted to convey in her message. 'But regrettably, in two minutes I shall be asking my employees to enter the pub and kill anyone they find inside.' The words hung in the air, the PA still hissing as if she were going to add something. Like an apology for the inconvenience.

But she did not. And the hissing stopped.

'Now,' Dent said loudly. 'Let's not do anything hasty here. There's strength in numbers you know. I wouldn't be intimidated by that sort of brash language if I were you.'

There were stirrings, people fidgeting, moving, finishing their drinks with some degree of rapidity.

Sensing some fellow feeling, Dent continued. 'You know, I remember once, I was in this chapel on Effilibus, and outside

were these tribesmen. About a hundred or so. Maybe five hundred. Anyway -' He paused in order to step out of the way of the people struggling to get to the foyer outside.

'Are you sure you've considered all the options here?' Dent asked.

But his words were drowned out by the sound of tables and chairs being pulled away from the door.

When it was quiet again. Dent pushed them all back against the door. 'It's good to know there are some people who you can rely on, anyway,' he said with more bravado than he actually felt for once.

He sat himself down on the stool next to the one other person left in the pub and pulled across an empty glass. 'You spare a drop of that stuff?' he asked Benny.

She nodded. 'I think it's time for last orders.'

Jason's shoes were wet from the rain. As he tried to stop, he was just off the carpet and on to the marble tiles. His feet skidded, flying away from under him, and he landed on his back with a yell of surprise. Apart from the humiliation, he reflected as everyone in the hotel foyer turned towards him, this was not an especially safe position to be in.

He pulled himself to his feet. He had already seen Mrs Winther, Nikole and Luggar together with an assortment of other heavies standing over by the door to the pub area. As he stood up, he could see Powlo and chums approaching down the corridor.

Since there were several men with very obvious guns between him and the main doors, that left just one direction. Jason looked up, and saw Clarence on the raised mezzanine level above him.

Clarence waved.

Not perhaps the most helpful thing he could have done, Jason thought. But then it wasn't Clarence who had drawn unwanted attention by falling over his own feet and yelling like a maniac. So who was he to criticize?

Jason did have on his side both the element of surprise, and a gun. With further wild yells and a couple of shots that

flew over the heads of Mrs Winther and the others, Jason made a dash for the escalator up to the mezzanine.

Clarence was waiting for him at the top, but Jason loosed off a couple more shots to show he was serious before he spoke. 'So how's things?' he enquired. 'Keep your head down, by the way,' he added unnecessarily as a bullet whizzed past them and struck the restaurant wall.

'I think', Clarence said carefully, 'that they can only get better.'

Jason nodded in agreement. 'And where's Benny?' he asked peering over the edge of the escalator and nearly catching his nose in the movement. 'No,' he said before Clarence could answer, 'let me guess.'

Over the top of the escalator he had a good view down into the foyer. He could see the heavies milling round the door to the pub. He couldn't see exactly what they were attaching to the door, but by the way they turned and walked quickly away to take cover behind the reception desk, he reckoned he could make an informed guess.

'Good news and bad news, then,' he muttered as he watched. 'Just the two of them in there?' Jason asked as the charges detonated. The sound was deafening even at a distance. Below them the door exploded into matchwood. One chunk of wood still clung forlornly to a sagging hinge close to the top of the door frame. Beyond, through the clearing smoke, Jason could see a pile of broken tables and splintered chairs.

'Everyone else left,' Clarence said.

'Figures.'

'So,' Clarence asked as the noise and smoke died away, 'what's the good news?'

Jason pushed his gun over the moving top step of the escalator. 'The good news is', he said as he aimed, 'that we have excellent cover up here, and a good angle on the doorway.' He squeezed off a shot and immediately pulled back from the edge.

From below came a cry, followed by running feet. When he hazarded another look, the area round the door was clear. He

crawled slightly further out to make sure nobody was coming up the escalator. They weren't.

But on one of the lower steps was a red canister. It was being carried slowly but inexorably towards the top.

Clarence was kneeling beside Jason, also watching. 'They'll have watched how fast the escalator moves,' he said. 'They'll have set the timer exactly.'

Together they watched the canister rising towards them.

'If we move away,' Jason said matter-of-factly, 'that'll give them a clear shot from below. And if we stay here...'

'Could you shoot it off the step?' Clarence asked.

'Excellent thought.' Jason leant out slightly further. A bullet just missed his cheek, but he ignored it. The trick, he reckoned was in the timing. Let the canister get close enough for a decent shot, but not so close it might go off. He braced himself, let out his breath, sighted along the gun, and squeezed the trigger.

You can tell a good shot as you make it. This one was great all the way. Jason knew it even as he heard the sound. And, he had to admit to himself, it was hardly his fault if the equipment let him down, was it?

Click.

'Bugger!'

Click-click-click-click-click.

'The sodding gun's empty.' The canister was rapidly approaching now. In desperation, Jason hurled the gun at it. And missed.

'What does EMERGENCY STOP mean?' Clarence asked close to Jason's ear.

'What?'

'It's just that it's printed on this red button beside you.'

The escalator stopped abruptly. There was no slowing, no grinding of the struggling mechanism as it braked. Just total stillness. Instant.

The canister was jolted forward as the step stopped beneath it. It bounced on the wall of the next step and rolled slowly back again. For a moment it teetered on the edge of its step, then it toppled over and bounced on to the step below.

As it fell it gained momentum, bouncing ever more rapidly down the motionless escalator.

For what seemed like a long time the people in the foyer below watched the canister's progress. Then, as abruptly as the escalator had stopped, they moved. People were still diving out of the way, scrabbling for cover, when the charge went off.

Jason and Clarence both ducked down. The force of the blast rocked the floor beneath them. A sudden brisk breeze whipped at their hair. They felt the heat on their faces. When they risked a look back down the escalator they saw that a good portion of it close to the bottom was missing, blown completely away.

Jason held out his hand, and Clarence shook it.

'Well, we need another plan to save Benny,' Jason admitted. 'But at least we're safe now. There's no way they can get up here to us.'

Clarence said nothing. He had let go of Jason's hand. Now he tapped him on the shoulder.

'What? What is it?' Jason rolled slightly on to his back to see where Clarence was looking.

Standing behind them, towering above them, was Powlo. He was holding a gun that looked much bigger than the one Jason had recently discarded. He was pointing it at them.

'How the hell did you get up here?' Jason asked in surprise.

'Easy.' Powlo was grinning now. Like a maniac. 'I took the lift.'

The wine was really excellent. Could have been a little cooler, but very good indeed. It was nice having the place to themselves, Benny thought. Though the noise, she had to admit, was something of a trial.

She swung round on her stool so she could see better what Dent was up to. He was running from table to table near the door, keeping low. Occasionally he popped his head up a little and waved his gun about. Benny took another sip of wine. Boys!

‘Do you have to?’ she shouted across the empty pub as Dent fired another shot through the doorway.

‘Sorry, but they’re creeping closer again,’ he called back. ‘I just hope they didn’t bring any more grenades.’

‘Such a fuss,’ Benny muttered. She read the label on the bottle again. She wasn’t sure about the hint of gooseberry, but the crisp dry finish was certainly there. She shooshed some wine round her mouth and forced it through her teeth. Gooseberry? Perhaps. Just a hint.

She returned her attention to Dent as he fired off another shot. Honestly, she had been impressed enough before. Why did he have to go to such extremes? He was so like Jason, she thought. Had to make an impact, had to show he was important and there to protect her. First the exaggerated macho tales of derring-do, and now these antics with the gun.

Another shot. But this time not from Dent. A bottle above the bar exploded, collapsing in on itself as its middle disintegrated. Liquid poured down from the shelf and splashed to the bar surface below.

Benny frowned, and sighed, and picked a shard of glass from her wine. She dipped in her little finger and teased the tiny fragment out, shaking it off. Then she sucked her finger and watched the puddle forming on the bar. Like the rain outside, she mused. Drip-drip-drip. Such a pleasant sound. A bit like a waterfall. They were relaxing. She could watch waterfalls all day. Every day.

And rainbows, too, come to that.

The hotel foyer was like a battlefield. Several of Mrs Winther’s employees were sitting nursing wounds and pride. Two were lying still on the floor. Most of the rest were clustered in areas of cover close to the pub door.

At a safe distance and angle from the door, Powlo presented Mrs Winther, Nikole and Luggar with his catch.

‘How nice to see you again, Professor Bloggs,’ Mrs Winther oozed. ‘But I suppose that is not your real name at all.’ She

waved her hand dismissively. 'No matter. Just let me know what you want on the headstone.'

'I wouldn't kill us if I were you,' Jason said quickly.

'I'm sure. And I'm not you.' But she seemed intrigued nonetheless.

Nikole leant forward slightly. 'Kill them,' she advised. 'Do it now and get them out of the way.'

'I am willing to bargain,' Jason said.

'With what?' snorted Nikole. 'Your life? That's already forfeit.'

'Quiet a moment, Nikole,' Mrs Winther said. 'You have thirty seconds, she told Jason. 'Then I kill you and your friend.'

Jason looked at Clarence. He drew a deep breath. 'Here's the deal,' he said. 'You won't get Benny out of there, you know.'

'Oh?' Luggar said.

'No,' Jason insisted with more confidence than he felt. 'She's got possibly the most hardy and intelligent hunk of a bodyguard in the known cosmos to protect her, and just about an endless supply of alcohol.'

'He's right,' Clarence chipped in. 'Professor Summerfield and Mr Harper have the upper hand at the moment.'

From across the foyer a shot rang out by way of punctuation. One of the men close to the pub door leapt back with a cry, clutching his leg in pain.

Jason smiled and shook his head as they watched. 'Believe me,' he said, 'I know Benny. And I know she's in there for a while. Easily long enough for the authorities to arrive and sort you out.' He made a play of looking at his watch.

'They've already arrived,' Powlo offered. 'The guys are holding them at Whitaker and Fourth.'

'But for how long?' Jason insisted. 'Look, here's the deal: let my friend here go - he's no good to you. If you have a score to settle, it's with me, not him.' He held his hand up to stop Clarence before he could argue.

'And what if I do?' Mrs Winther asked.

‘If you let him go,’ Jason said, ‘I’ll tell you how to deal with Benny. I can get you Dorpfeld’s Prism without another shot being fired.’ He looked deep into the old woman’s grey eyes. ‘Deal?’

CHAPTER 12

‘So, there I was. Stuck in the middle of the swamp and surrounded by the shnorks. I couldn’t see them, of course. For one thing it was getting dark. But I could hear them slithering through the undergrowth and splashing through the sludge. Getting closer every minute. They don’t move fast. In fact they’re quite slow. At first I thought that would be a benefit. But as I stood there, hardly daring to breathe, I decided that the waiting was worse. Better by far for them just to fly at me and finish it.

‘They do everything slowly, you see. And that includes eating. The more I tried not to, the more I couldn’t stop thinking about that

‘I didn’t actually imagine them eating me. Somehow it was worse than that. I could remember the previous week I’d seen a stoporath caught in a mud pool. I guess it just hadn’t seen it, had blundered into it. Perhaps in the dark. Like me. But, whatever the story, it was stuck solid. It was too tired by now even to thrash about. Just lying there on its back, waiting to die. Hoping to die.

‘The mud wasn’t so deep it had sunk, wasn’t so deep it would drown. But it was deep enough to keep it there while the shnorks made their slow way across from the bank, slithering and sliding through the dark viscous mud. I suppose it had been stuck there for a few days. It was weak with starvation, dehydration, and struggling. Too weak to throw off the shnorks. There were several of them, their heads already well inside the stoporath’s hide. Burrowing under its skin. Eating through the mass of meat and crunching on die bones. Oh, so very slowly.

‘And it was remembering that helpless animal, just lying there, slowly dying, that was the most frightening thing. Not being eaten alive - that’s a sort of occupational hazard, as

you're very well aware. No, it's the thought of inaction, of being totally helpless.

'That's why I wanted it over quickly.

'But, while I had the time, I waited. I suppose if I had really wanted it over I could have just said to hell with it and struck out into the swamp. I'd have been over my head in a few seconds. A minute if I was lucky. And there was just an outside hint of a slim chance that I might actually manage to find a safe route back to the trail.

'A dilemma. A dichotomy. I thought about it, of course. You do, don't you? I thought about why I was waiting for certain death, why inaction was somehow better than no action at all. What was I waiting for? Was it the hope that someone would find me? Or is it just that we don't like to do anything, especially if there's a risk to it, until we absolutely have to? I don't know. I didn't know then and I still don't know now.

'So there I was, afraid more than anything of being able to do nothing. Yet choosing - actively — to do nothing. Maybe that's the difference. Until you do it, there's always the uncertainty. That's why we avoid it. Or sometimes, like then, that's why we wait. Because we're betting on the risk, banking on the high stakes paying off, depending on the improbability of our actions succeeding.

'Another strange thing is that while there's sort of nothing happening within you, you focus more clearly on what's happening outside. I couldn't work out what it was I wanted to do, what was for the best. But I could hear every sound within the swamp. I could hear the jub-jubs calling to each other, the spridors nibbling at leaves and pulling down branches in the distance. And I could hear the ever-closer slithering of the shnorks.

'There were smells I can still remember as clearly as when I was there. They say smell is the sense most connected to memory, so maybe that's why. It's a direct input through the nose and into the base of the brain rather than filtered through nerves and interpreted by organs. They weren't pleasant smells. The marsh itself was a sickly, sticky, cloying of dead animals and rotting vegetation. But sprinkled among

that was the scent of the voletta flowers and the pungent, acidic sap from the bark of the codix trees.

‘And the view was something else. If you’re going to die, do it at night with a full moon shining down at you through the fronds of the codix. It’s spectacularly indescribable. Magic. It makes you feel so at one with the world. So free and light-headed. So alive. Which is another irony.

‘Stare at it long enough, though, and you reach a sort of inner calm. A confidence in the world around you and then, somehow, in yourself. Maybe that’s what happened to Buddha, sitting under that tree. There isn’t some revelation suddenly that explains everything. There isn’t even a slow realization about how things should be or ways to make them better. There’s just a moment when it dawns on you that you’re at peace. Serene. Calm. That death, and therefore life, holds no real frights or surprises for you. An at-oneness. With the world, yourself, everything.

‘Now, I suppose some people stop at that point. They just enjoy the moments and make the most of it as their own personal shnorks creep up and slowly devour them. I didn’t though. Perversely, it made me angry. That’s the sort of person I was, I guess. It made me realize how much I wanted to live. How much I wanted to go on discovering moments like this. The “high” isn’t in living out your life like that, it’s in knowing that you can achieve such a state, can aspire to it, Somehow, some way, in the humdrum of everyday life, there’s more that you can achieve, can feel, can live for.

‘That was why I decided to act. I decided to get out of it, and if the shnorks went hungry then that was their problem’

It had been quiet for a while now. But Dent was sure that the danger was not past. They would be back. They would lick their wounds, if they had any, and redouble their efforts, But, in the meantime, why not sit with Benny, drink some wine, and talk about past problems? ‘So,’ he asked her, how did you get out?’

She shrugged, and made no answer. He waited while she sipped at the wine, staring into space. He glanced toward the

barricades still holding, just, over the torn entrance to the pub.

Benny sighed, recapturing his attention. 'I don't remember,' she said quietly.

'Sorry?' Was she joking?

'I don't remember,' she repeated, louder. 'Really I don't. But I must have got out somehow.'

'Evidently.' He smiled. 'We have living proof.'

'Mmm. I had this... problem.'

'Oh?'

'In my head.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah. Fine now. Bit worrying at the time. More than a bit.' She still seemed strangely happy and at peace with the world - still in the swamp, perhaps, in her mind. 'Anyway,' she went on, 'to cut to the quick of the story, when I got my head sorted, I lost some of my memories.'

Dent frowned. 'How many?'

She looked at him as if he were a child who needed gently, nudging towards the obvious. Add these two fingers to the two you're holding up, sort of thing. 'How would I know?' she asked quietly. 'There are no gaps that I can discern, no edges to what I do recall. Just a feeling of... being incomplete. Just that sometimes when people say things they think I understand I don't have a clue what they're going on about.'

Dent feigned shock and horror. 'I get that, too,' he said.

She laughed, actually laughed, though he could tell that underneath it all the experience must be terrible. 'Not like this,' she said. 'At first, I was afraid I'd have forgotten how to read or write or do sums or use a trowel. Stuff like that. But it's more like life's a film and I had to keep stepping out.' She laughed again. 'A real pisser.'

Dent glanced towards the door, then satisfied that all was quiet - for the moment - he took her hand. 'Benny,' he said gently. 'I'm so sorry. It must be awful. I rely on my memories, I think we all do. I write them up - OK, so I embellish a bit. Occasionally. But I know, inside I know, what really happened. What it was like. I was there.'

Benny lifted her hand, still holding Dent's. She looked at his knuckles. 'I used to think that. It's why I came out here. Partly. Get some new memories, sort of start again. I suppose. I have diaries, I have some - maybe most even - of my memories. But when I read about the bits I don't remember, it will be difficult to believe they happened to me. It will be impossible to peel away the embellishments. Oh, I can do it a bit, read between the lines, see how I've altered what I wrote. But the gap between what happened in my head and what I told my diary, that can never be bridged. I did think that was terrible. But you know -' she looked up at him, her eyes moist but smiling ' - it isn't at all.'

'No?'

She shrugged and poured more wine. 'No. I don't remember how I got out of the swamp. But I did. I did it once, somehow. That's what's important. Baron Munchausen told a story about how he was stuck in a swamp once. You know how he said he got out?'

Dent shook his head.

'He said he picked himself up by his own bootstraps and carried himself out.'

They both laughed. Benny's laugh sounded genuine - carefree and light. Dent's was heavy with the reality of the situation outside.

'That's where the phrase "boots up" comes from, you know,' she said. 'When a computer boots up, it's doing that - it's starting the program that starts itself up. Picking itself up by the bootstraps.'

She paused a moment to drink again.

'Munchausen was never really in the swamp, of course,' she said. 'But I was. And I got out. Not by some miracle of gravity-defiance. But probably something quite simple or incredibly lucky. If I knew how I did it, the story probably wouldn't be worth telling. If I knew, it would likely be some straightforward thing that a moron would have thought of at once. If I knew, I'd see the deficiencies in myself and the weaknesses. I'd be embarrassed by it, not proud of it. But by not knowing I can see that my escape was a drawing on inner

strength. I can concentrate on the achievement, on the fact that I did it then. And so I can do it again.

‘It’s sort of making existentialism work for you rather than against you. I don’t know, so I can assume the best Whatever problem I have to solve, whatever situation I get into, maybe I’ve been there before and survived.’ She nodded, lips pursed together thoughtfully. ‘It’s good,’ she said with conviction.

There was an incredulous silence.

‘I take it nobody thought of that,’ Jason said. ‘Even the cleverest people sometimes overlook the obvious, you know. I wouldn’t feel bad about it.’ He waited a moment to see if anyone was about to comment. When they didn’t, he added, ‘Can my friend go now, please?’

Mrs Winther looked at him as if through a haze. ‘Say that again.’ Her voice was thick and husky.

‘I said, “Can my friend go now, please?”’

‘Not if you’re going to act smart,’ Nikole told him. She nodded to Powlo, who twisted Jason’s arms painfully behind him.

‘All right,’ Jason winced. ‘The other thing I said was, “Why don’t you just ask her to give it to you?”’

Mrs Winther was still giving him the stare through her tiny black dots of eyes. ‘And why would she do that? Why would she just hand over Dorpfeld’s Prism?’ But there was a hint of belief in her voice.

‘Why wouldn’t she?’ Jason said. ‘I can’t believe she really wants it. Certainly no more than her life.’

‘And Harper?’

Jason shrugged. Or as close as he could get with his arms held tight behind his back. ‘Same goes for him. They probably don’t know what you’re after. You’re just some crazies trying to kill them. Happens all the time round here.’

For a while there was silence again as Mrs Winther considered Jason’s words. Then she nodded to Luggar. ‘Let him go-’

Luggar released his grip on Clarence. Powlo also let go of Jason’s arms.

‘Not him,’ Mrs Winther said pointedly. ‘He and I have a score to settle still. No matter how this turns out.’ She stepped closer to Jason, as Powlo took his arms again. Her face was thrust up towards Jason’s so that he could smell her breath. He could see the flabby, wrinkled skin on her neck stretching like a turtle’s as she looked up at him. ‘Take him back to the villa,’ she said. ‘We can deal with him there, later.’ She pointed to Nikole. ‘You go with them. Keep a close eye on him.’ She turned away, pausing to add, ‘Just don’t kill him before I get back.’

Jason blew out a long breath. ‘Bye, Clarence,’ he said cheerily. ‘See if you can finish off what we started, will you?’

Clarence nodded gravely. ‘I’ll do what I can,’ he promised. Then Luggar dragged him across the foyer and flung him out of the hotel doorway.

For a few seconds, Jason could see Clarence through the glass of the door, standing outside in the rain. The water was trickling down his face, like tears. Then Powlo dragged Jason away towards the corridor down to the back entrance of the hotel, and Clarence was lost to sight.

The shout startled Dent. He had been expecting shooting, or explosions. Not a voice.

‘What do you want?’ he yelled back from just behind what was left of the barricade.

‘Just to talk to Professor Summerfield. One to one.’ Mrs Winther’s voice was oily and trying to sound artless. Maybe that’s why she wasn’t using the PA this time. The personal touch.

‘Just a minute,’ Dent shouted back.

He turned to the bar, where Benny was holding up her wineglass and watching the liquid inside slush against the sides as she rotated it slowly by the stem. ‘What do you think?’ he asked her. ‘Do we want to talk?’

Benny did not look at him when she answered. ‘Of course,’ she said. Her voice had the dreamy quality again. ‘Talking is good.’

‘Better than being shot at,’ Dent agreed. He raised his voice and called out, ‘All right, but just you, Mrs Winther. Alone. In here.’

There was silence from outside and he could imagine the urgent consultations, the arguments and counterarguments. Whatever they were up to, it was obviously important to them or they wouldn’t even consider talking. Let alone the old woman coming in without guards and heavies. Maybe the enforcers were right outside. Or maybe they were planning something. Actually, Dent decided, he didn’t care. They were in the swamp, and, like Benny, he knew he’d got out before. He’d do it again. Probably.

In any case, he was certain they wouldn’t accept the conditions.

‘All right, we agree,’ Mrs Winther’s voice said. ‘Let me in.’

Rather than invite Mrs Winther to perch her considerable bulk on a bar stool, they had moved to a booth at the back of the pub. It was quiet, it was cosy, the lighting was subtle and the wine was good.

‘It’s nice of you to join us,’ Benny said. She smiled at the old woman. ‘I think we caught the place on a quiet day.’

‘This is not a social occasion,’ Mrs Winther said. Her glass sat untouched on the table in front of her. She glanced furtively towards the broken door, where a cluster of faces were peering into the pub, straining to hear what was going on.

‘Usually it’s buzzing,’ Benny went on, unconcerned. ‘I like bars. And pubs. Real pubs. Not just because of the alcohol, either. There’s an atmosphere, a feel to them. Don’t you find?’

‘What do you want?’ Dent asked as Benny sipped at her wine. He was sitting beside her, facing Mrs Winther across the table.

‘You know what I want,’ the old woman said. Her voice was a dry husk of sound. ‘Dorpfeld’s Prism. That’s why I’m here. That’s why we’re all here.’

Dent nodded. ‘And what if I said we don’t have it?’

‘Then my employees will have to torture you to find out who has.’ She leant forward, as far as her enormous bosom would allow. ‘But I’m sure that won’t be necessary. Will it?’ Her dark little eyes seemed to be absorbed into the flesh around them as she smiled.

‘And why should we hand it over even if we do have it?’

Mrs Winther’s eyes emerged into the light again. ‘It’s very important to me that I have it,’ she said. ‘You don’t need to know any more than that. I mean to have it, you know. And what use is it to you? So many people have died already,’ she said, sounding almost sad. There was a cardboard drip mat on the table in front of her and she picked it up. As she said each name, she tore a strip from the side of the mat, dropping the cardboard back on to the table. ‘Miklos Frunt, Jericko Klench. Several of my own people. Your friend Professor Bloggs - soon.’ She paused, poised ready to tear off another strip of cardboard. ‘Dent Harper and Bernice Summerfield.’ She tore halfway down the mat and then stopped. ‘Perhaps...’

Dent stared at her. Benny seemed more interested in her wine, sitting back watching without comment. ‘I don’t know anyone called Bloggs,’ she murmured with a slight giggle. ‘I would remember that, I’m sure.’

‘And consider,’ Mrs Winther continued, ‘however much you might want Dorpfeld’s Prism, however much you think you can understand it, or unravel its secrets, however much you think you can profit from it, it will be useless to you if you’re dead.’ As she finished speaking she completed the tear, and another strip of cardboard dropped to the table.

‘I think you’ve made your point,’ Dent said quietly. ‘Obviously we need a moment to discuss this.’

Mrs Winther waved an agreeable hand and made to get up.

‘Oh please, stay,’ Benny said at once. ‘There’s really nothing to discuss here.’

Mrs Winther’s eyes narrowed again. Dent stiffened.

‘Are you sure you know what you’re doing, Benny?’ he asked.

‘Oh yes.’

She pulled the silver chain over her head and held the Prism up so that Mrs Winther could see it. The old woman was almost salivating as the crystal caught the dim light and reflected it. Dots of refracted yellow and pale blue danced over the table and the side of the booth.

‘It is so kind of you to come here and point out the dangers of owning this relic,’ Benny said as she held it aloft. ‘And to offer to take on the curse that it seems really is attached to it.’

‘You’ll...’ Mrs Winther paused to lick two fleshy lips with a bloodless tongue. ‘You’ll give it to me?’

Benny leant forward. ‘Of course,’ she said. ‘Since you ask. You obviously want it more than I do.’ She hesitated a moment as she reached forward. ‘Pretty, though, isn’t it?’ she said as she twisted it slightly to catch more of the light. Then she dropped the relic into Mrs Winther’s eager palm.

The change in the old woman was immediate. Her eyes seemed to open and deepen, lightening to a dark grey. Her sagging dewlap lifted slightly; her mouth twisted into a smile more genuine than any she had practised for a long while. She held Dorpfeld’s Prism in her hand, outstretched before her as she waddled towards the door. Benny walked beside her, Dent following just behind.

‘So, er, we’re all friends now, then?’ Dent asked. ‘We are free to go, yes?’

She paused as they approached the door and looked back at Dent. Her features had settled into a relaxed, almost dreamy expression. ‘Oh yes,’ she said lightly. ‘Yes, of course, my friend.’ She turned to Benny, and said, ‘Professor Summerfield?’

‘Call me Benny, please.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Mrs Winther said quietly. ‘I was wrong.’

‘Oh? What about?’

Mrs Winther sighed. Behind her the several faces at the door edged closer, listening to every word. ‘I don’t really need this.’ She held up the chain, allowing the prism itself to dangle between herself and Benny. ‘I thought I did, but in fact I have so much. So much to give thanks for. And it’s not

as if I can't afford to buy whatever I need. Except happiness, of course.' She nodded, as if realizing. 'You have to look within yourself for that. It's not a question of money, or power, or...' She held out Dorpfeld's Prism to Benny. Or baubles,' she said. 'Here, you have it. A gift.'

Then she dropped Dorpfeld's Prism back into Benny's hand. As she let go, her expression changed, slightly. The trace of a frown appeared. But then she reached out and gave Benny a sudden, stiflingly unexpected hug. When she pulled back, the expression of happiness was restored. She nodded. 'Yes,' she said softly, 'yes, that was a good thing to do I think.'

Dent stared in astonishment. Benny just grinned, her hands thrust deep into her jacket pockets as she watched Mrs Winther turn back to the door.

'Yes,' the old woman said as she left. 'Yes, this is a nice place. I must come back when it's a little busier. When I can absorb some of that atmosphere you were talking about.'

Then, with a trail of confused and silent followers, she walked across the hotel foyer and out into the rain. From somewhere close by came the sound of a wailing siren.

Dent watched in continuing surprise. 'Well,' he said at last, 'what do you think of that?'

'I think', Benny called to him from back inside the pub, 'that I'm going to finish my wine. Care to join me?'

Nobody spoke the whole way out to the villa. Jason made a few attempts to engage Nikole or Powlo in conversation, but without success. He decided after a while that Nikole just wasn't interested in talking to him, and that Powlo perhaps didn't have the ability.

The villa was visible through the tinted windows of the ground car from a long way out. It was floodlit, standing proud atop a shelf of rock against the night sky. The full moon was behind it, and away from the smog of the city the air was clear and crisp.

Jason had not been to the back of the villa before. All his visits had been through the main entrance, and then in

rooms that faced back towards the city. So it was with a sense of surprise mingled with awe that he stood and looked out over the view.

The gleaming white exterior of the villa towered above him as he stood at the corner of the building. The floodlights made it seem even cleaner and brighter than the daylight. A stark contrast to the deeds and thoughts that went on inside. A whited sepulchre, Jason thought ruefully. And then it occurred to him that pretty soon his own bones might well be added to the others that had undoubtedly been housed within it over the years.

The view out away from the villa was a welcome distraction as Powlo pushed Jason forward. There was a staircase up the outside of the building leading to a large balcony jutting out from the second storey. The end of the staircase at ground level was at the corner of the house where Jason stood, and he started to ascend. Immediately the stairs were over open space for the ground dropped away into the distance below. He could not see how far the drop was, but the waterfall gave a clue.

And it was the waterfall that was the most spectacular aspect of the view. The streaming torrent of pale-blue water gushed out from beside the villa, crashing down to the hidden depths below. Several of the floodlights shone through the water and the staircase went up through the eye of the waterfall, coming out above it. As they ascended they were level with the crescent of arcing water. From the top of the stairs they would be looking out over the top of the waterfall.

‘Impressive, isn’t it?’ Nikole whispered in Jason’s ear as they went up the stairs.

He answered without turning from the view. ‘Yes.’

‘I always think’, she said, loud enough for Powlo to hear as well, ‘that this is the best view anyone could enjoy. As the last thing they see, I mean.’

Powlo guffawed with laughter at this. ‘Even if they see it through their own blood,’ he added.

Jason nodded and sighed. 'Nice sentiment,' he told the ape of a man. 'Lacks the refined subtlety of Nikole's comment, but a good try.' The weight of Powlo's hand on his back propelled him up several more stairs. 'Perhaps you should get out more,' Jason hazarded.

The balcony was separated from the main room by a sliding glass door. It opened automatically as Jason stumbled towards it. He regained his balance inside the room and looked round.

It was a large room, one half all but filled with a heavy wooden conference table. The other half of the room was empty, the floor clear. But the walls were not. It took Jason only a moment to take in the manacles and shackles at shoulder and ankle height along one length. Another moment to notice the rack of sharp, unpleasant-looking implements close by. On a third section of wall was arranged a display of swords of varying lengths, together with several small round shields and a couple of serrated daggers.

'This where the cabaret takes place?' he asked, his voice shaking slightly.

Nikole was standing behind him. 'That's right,' she said. 'Mrs Winther likes some distraction between agenda items when she meets with her people. Helps to keep them focused on the matters in hand, she says. Helps to keep their attention and their loyalty.'

'That figures,' Jason agreed.

'And the good news is', Nikole told him, 'that tonight you're the star turn.'

Once Mrs Winther and her colleagues had left, a semblance of normality returned to the Xcelsior remarkably quickly. The hotel had been burnt, bombed and battered many times during its life, so a quick firefight was not much of a disruption to business. The loss of a single escalator and one door did not deter the regular clientele from returning to the bar in the pub area. As the enforcement-agency people drifted away with the usual empty promises and vague

comments that something should and would be done, so people drifted back to the pub.

Clarence was one of the first to enter, keeping his head down and trying to avoid attracting any attention. He sat in the next booth to where Dent and Benny were still situated. This gave him the twin advantages of being at once hidden from their sight but also being able to overhear their conversation. Dent had taken the precaution of liberating another bottle of wine before the staff returned and started to sweep up the mess, so it looked like they were planning to stay for the rest of the night.

Clarence's own plan, so far as he had one, was to establish what Harper and Benny were up to, check they were safe and sound and out of trouble for a while, and then try to help Jason. If he needed it. He had risked flying up into the night sky and watched the ground car through the streets of the city and out into the barren countryside beyond.

He had watched for long enough to be sure he knew where the ground car was headed - until he had seen it on to the single road that led to a villa that matched Jason's description of where Mrs Winther lived. Then he had hurried back to the Xcelsior in time to hide away his wings and make for the pub.

Now he sat alone and silent in the booth, his back to where Dent and Benny were sitting on the other side of the padded bench seat. In front of him was a glass of water, untouched. The ice was beginning to melt.

'It was kind of her to take the time to come and talk to us,' Benny was saying the other side of the partition. 'She must be a busy woman.'

'Oh yes,' Harper agreed. 'People to kill, places to trash. Very busy.'

Clarence could imagine Benny shrugging, sipping at her drink as she said, 'Yes, but even so, to warn us about the dangers of keeping Dorpfeld's Prism. That surely shows a bit of consideration.'

'She just wanted it for herself. That's why she was here. That's why she had her thugs blow down the door and shoot

at us.' There was more than a trace of exasperation in Harper's voice.

'Oh you're exaggerating,' Benny told him. 'Why do you have to be so macho and melodramatic? It wasn't like that at all.'

'Oh? And what was it like, then?'

'A misunderstanding, I expect. Look -' Benny was sounding miffed now '- if she was really that desperate to get hold of the thing rather than just warn us about the potential dangers of keeping it - not that I subscribe to that curse nonsense, you understand - but if that was the case, why did she give it back? Eh? Tell me that.'

There was silence for a while. When Harper answered his voice was quieter and his tone more subdued. 'I don't know,' he admitted. 'I just don't -'

'You just don't understand. I know. You keep saying.'

'Well, I don't,' he snapped back at her. 'This whole place has become crazy lately. More crazy than usual.' He sighed audibly. 'I just can't believe she went away empty-handed after all that. I can't believe she just gave Dorpfeld's Prism back to you and left without it.'

In reply Benny said something that Clarence did not catch.

But he did catch Harper's reaction: 'What?' the man said loudly. Then slightly more quietly, slightly embarrassed at having shouted: 'What did you say?'

'I said she didn't go away empty-handed,' Benny said. Clarence could hear her quite clearly now. 'I thought she deserved something for her time and trouble. So when we hugged I slipped Dorpfeld's Prism into her pocket.' Clarence could hear the smug expression in Benny's voice. 'She got what she came for, though she probably doesn't realize it yet.'

CHAPTER 13

The chains were fastened to the wall every bit as firmly as Jason had expected and feared. He tugged at them anyway - it was probably expected. Certainly Nikole and Powlo were watching him with a shared air of amused satisfaction.

‘Don’t you think this is just a little extreme?’ Jason asked.

Nikole shook her head. ‘I don’t think so, Professor Bloggs.’

‘Look, Mrs Winther told you not to hurt me,’ he protested.

‘No,’ Nikole corrected him. ‘She told me not to *kill* you. No stipulation about hurting. I think our options are pretty much open there.’

‘Oh, joy,’ sighed Jason. ‘Can we talk about this?’

‘What’s there to say?’

‘Scream about it more like,’ Powlo said with evident glee.

‘I’ve been chained up before, you know,’ Jason told them, as if that made any difference.

Nikole seemed amused at the comment. ‘Then we shall have to ensure that it never happens to you again,’ she said.

‘You may change your tune when Mrs Winther gets back,’ Jason said with mock bravado. ‘When she has Dorpfeld’s Prism.’

Nikole gave a short sharp laugh, half of amusement half of annoyance. ‘That bauble. It’s caused more trouble and expense that you can believe.’

Jason looked at her closely. ‘You don’t know what it is, do you?’ he said.

‘I don’t *care* what it is,’ she shot back. ‘A waste of time. Needless expense and effort, that’s what it’s been.’

‘But if Mrs Winther thinks it is important...’ Jason said slowly. He sensed there was a feeling he could exploit here, a division he could perhaps open. Just a crack.

‘She’s losing it,’ Powlo said unexpectedly. ‘I’ve been thinking, Nikole. You’re right, she’s losing it.’

‘Be quiet, Powlo,’ Nikole hissed at him. ‘We’ll talk later. When this is over. When we’ve finished with him.’ She nodded at Jason.

‘Oh I won’t tell,’ Jason assured her. ‘Don’t mind me. Just let me go before Mrs Winther gets back and you can carp and complain with impunity.’ He looked at Powlo. ‘Sorry, shall I say that again in fewer syllables?’ Powlo glared at him dangerously. ‘Er, easier words?’

Even though he knew it was coming, there was not much room to roll with the punch chained up as he was. Jason was sure he would have a hefty bruise across his chin and lower cheek. But at least there was some dialogue with his captors now. If only his jaw wasn’t broken and he could talk. His plan, so far as he had one, was to keep them occupied and stay as intact as possible until Mrs Winther arrived. If she had Dorpfeld’s Prism, Jason knew she would be in a good mood. She would be at one with the world, in an ecstasy of positive vibes produced by the device. And, in such a mood, how could she not pardon any prisoner who was charming and polite and asked her nicely? Provided he was still able to talk, still able to put his case.

As he was working through the idea again, looking for loopholes and feeling as smug as, under the circumstances, he could, Jason heard the door open. He could not see round the ‘L’ of the room to where the door was. If he strained forward he could see most of the conference table, though. And he could hear the voice of Mrs Winther almost immediately.

‘Ah, there you are, Nikole,’ she was saying. She sounded upbeat and happy. So far, so good. ‘How nice to see you again. And you, Powlo. Well, I trust?’

‘Yes, Mrs Winther,’ Nikole replied. Jason was pleased to hear that she sounded slightly shaken by the tone of her mistress.

Mrs Winther’s more than ample form appeared in Jason’s peripheral vision and quickly moved to where he could see all of her. The light seemed to dim as she moved. ‘And Professor Bloggs. Comfortable, I trust?’

‘Hardly,’ Jason managed to say. ‘I assume my excellent plan worked and you have Dorpfeld’s Prism?’

‘Yes and no.’ She crossed to the big conference table and settled herself into the huge armchair set at its head. Then she gestured for Powlo and Nikole to join her. Luggar stood behind her, hands behind his back and eyes wary.

‘Yes and no?’ Jason enquired.

‘Yes, your plan worked,’ she called across the room to him.

‘Oh, good.’

‘And no, I don’t have Dorpfeld’s Prism.’

‘What?’ Jason screeched, at roughly the same time as Powlo and Nikole.

‘I gave it back to Professor Summerfield. To Benny.’ The large woman folded her arms and looked at Powlo and Nikole. ‘Now please be quiet, young man, we have things to discuss here.’

Jason sagged in his chains. He pulled himself back up as he heard Nikole say, ‘We certainly do.’ There was an edge to her voice.

‘The first thing’, Mrs Winther went on, not seeming to notice Nikole’s tone, ‘is to discuss a redistribution of our financial assets.’

Luggar was impassive as ever, but Powlo and Nikole were exchanging looks.

Jason strained to hear Mrs Winther’s words. She was speaking in an uncharacteristically quiet voice. Her words were almost soft. ‘At present we make far more money than we need to conduct our businesses and reward employees. I think it is time we implemented some profit-sharing schemes and employee benefits.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Nikole said in amazement. ‘The Cartel is a crime syndicate, not a trust fund.’

‘A good point,’ Mrs Winther conceded happily. ‘But there is no employee better than a happy employee. And we have to think of our customers too. I am thinking of healthcare and medication for the girls, free needles and rehabilitation schemes for those addicts who so desire -’

‘I am thinking you’re kidding,’ Nikole said.

‘Absolutely, spot on!’ Jason shouted from his wall. ‘I think you’re right, Mrs Winther. And I think I’d add freedom for all prisoners to your list. A noble and enlightened gesture if ever there was one.’

Mrs Winther seemed to ignore both Nikole and Jason. ‘We are so lucky,’ she said. ‘Life has treated us well, and it’s time for us to repay that a little. Protection schemes that actually protect,’ she added. ‘That’s an idea.’

‘What’s happened to you?’ Nikole demanded. She was on her feet, leaning heavily on the table. ‘You used to be so sharp, so clever. You used to know exactly how to screw the last drop of money and blood from people. You used to see the importance of rule of terror to the Cartel.’ She shook her head. ‘But you’ve gone soft. Healthcare, protection...’ She looked at Powlo. ‘You’re right,’ she said.

Powlo nodded. But even from where he was Jason could see he was confused and troubled. Even Luggar was shifting uncertainly on his feet.

‘Nikole,’ Mrs Winther said gently, ‘you’re so good with the figures, so adept with the implements of torture, but don’t you see the advantages of the business ventures I’m proposing? Putting the customer first, and respect for the employees has to be top of our agenda. We have to make this world an even more beautiful place to live in. For everyone.’

Jason cleared his throat loudly. ‘Er, could you perhaps start over here?’ he suggested.

Mrs Winther looked across the room, then waved a finger to indicate that Luggar should go across to Jason. ‘Sort him out, would you?’ she asked pleasantly.

‘Of course, Mrs Winther,’ Luggar said, cracking his knuckles loudly as he crossed the room.

‘No hurry, actually,’ Jason said, drawing back into the wall. ‘Any time will do in fact. When you’re good and ready.’

Luggar was close in front of him now, still cracking his knuckles and flexing his fingers. He drew back his hand, a smile of anticipation on his face.

‘Wait,’ Mrs Winther called across the room. ‘Don’t *hit* him! Let him down from there.’

Luggar froze. His smile froze. There was silence for a long while. Then, with what seemed like an effort, the large elderly man said, 'Yes, Mrs Winther. Whatever you say.' He reached up and started to undo the manacles that held Jason's wrists.

'That's it, isn't it?' Nikole said. There was anger and defiance in her voice. "Whatever you say, Mrs Winther." That's always it. You always get your own way, no matter how ridiculous it is.'

Mrs Winther seemed surprised, but not perturbed by the outburst. 'I'm in charge,' she said simply.

Nikole was shaking her head again. 'First this stupid chase after a worthless old relic. Planning and investigation that took so much of our resources for so long. Then you say you just gave it away!' She was shouting now. 'Well, enough is enough. An old woman's dream of owning some trinket I can cope with, I can forgive. But this!'

She pointed towards Jason. Luggar was even now undoing the second manacle as Jason tried to shake some life back into his wrist.

'Sorry.' Jason shrugged and pulled his second hand free. 'Thanks,' he said to Luggar's impassive face.

'Do your own feet,' Luggar growled.

'You're not in charge,' Nikole was saying. 'Not any more. You're not fit to be in charge, and all this just proves what we've known for a long time.' She looked pointedly at Powlo.

He nodded. 'A long time,' he repeated.

'I think your Mrs Winther may be in a spot of bother here,' Jason whispered to Luggar.

Luggar was watching the proceedings carefully. He gave the smallest shake of his head. 'She's planning something,' he said.

Jason bent to undo the manacle round his left ankle. 'I wouldn't bet on it,' he said.

'Nikole, my dear,' Mrs Winther was saying. 'You've always been like a -'

But Nikole cut her off. 'I'm not your "dear",' she shouted in the old woman's face. Mrs Winther blinked with

astonishment. Powlo was on his feet in the same instant, leaning across the table towards Mrs Winther. The intended threat was obvious.

Nikole and Powlo both had their attention fully on Mrs Winther now. But Jason was watching Luggar walking back towards the table. He moved like a cat. An old, slightly stiff cat, it was true, but he was silent and walked with a certain fluidity despite his age. Jason tugged at the last manacle, but it refused to budge. He had undone the catch, but the metal was slightly bent and a little rusty. He pulled at it as hard as he could as he watched Luggar.

Luggar had almost reached Powlo before the younger man realized. It was Mrs Winther's ingenuous smile to her bodyguard that alerted him, and Powlo turned quickly, his hand inside his jacket pocket, reaching for his gun.

But Luggar already had his own gun out. He held it in his right hand as his massive left palm slammed Powlo's head down. The man sank to his knees in surprise and pain, the side of his head smacking into the top of the table. Somehow Luggar had already extracted the gun from Powlo's jacket, removed the cartridge and tossed both away across the room. Now Powlo's face was a squashed expression of pain, anger and fear as the barrel of Luggar's pistol jabbed into his cheek.

At exactly the same time as Luggar clicked the firing mechanism of his gun to ready, there was a similar click from behind him. Jason and Luggar both looked at Nikole at the same moment. The click had been the laserblade of a flick-cutter extending and locking into place. And now that blade was held against the sagging flesh of Mrs Winther's neck.

They were both in that pleasant state of inebriation where they knew they were edging on drunk and didn't care. And they each knew that the other was in the same state. And they each knew that they could remain on the brink for another hour and another few glasses. It was warm, and cosy, and friendly. Almost intimate.

'So what happened?' Benny asked.

Dent held up his finger while he drank. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and continued. 'Well, that's about it really. I was free, but Gevlon was at the mercy of the Klackers. I had a couple of options - run away or try to help him.'

Benny nodded encouragingly.

Dent shrugged. 'I spent perhaps a few seconds thinking it through. On the one hand he was a fellow human being, and he had been instrumental in setting me free before the Klackers closed in. But weighing against that was the fact that he'd chained me up in the dungeon in the first place. I suppose I had some sort of fellow feeling towards another human being. But I was also on a survival and self-preservation kick of my own. I'm not sure I made the right decision in terms of morality, ethics or humanity. But it was certainly the right choice in terms of survival. I suppose we might have both escaped if I'd gone to help him. But we probably wouldn't.'

'You ran,' Benny said, nodding. It figured. There was no censure or criticism intended.

'I ran,' Dent confirmed. 'And lived to tell the tale.' He picked up his glass, looked at it for a moment, then set it down again. 'Do you think that was wrong?'

'I think you have to decide at the time,' Benny said. 'I don't think it can be anyone else's call but your own. I don't think anyone can blame you for the decision you had to make.'

Dent nodded, tight-lipped. But he still did not drink. 'I'm tired,' he said at last. 'It's been a long day.'

'It's been a long night,' Benny agreed. 'I don't know where the time's gone. I mean,' she said, 'it's not as if we've been doing anything much.'

Dent just stared at her. Then he picked up his drink and downed it. 'Bedtime,' he said. 'Definitely bedtime.'

'Is that an offer?' Benny asked quietly.

If Clarence had been drinking from the glass of water that sat untouched on the table in front of him, he would have choked on it. As it was he stiffened, and pushed himself

further back into the seat, as much as his rucksack would allow, trying to hear better what was happening in the next booth. His eyes were wide and his improbable moustache was bristling at the edges.

In the glass on the table, the final remnants of the last cube of ice lazily melted into the water around it.

* * *

With a painful wrench, Jason managed to rip the manacle from his ankle. He breathed out heavily and surveyed the situation across the room. Powlo was flattened against the top of the table with Luggar's gun in his face, and Nikole was holding a knife at Mrs Winther's throat.

Well, that was good. It meant he could just leave. The sliding glass door out to the balcony was between him and them, so he could make it without being stopped. The way things were, probably nobody would notice. He stood up slowly and carefully and made his way towards the door, trying not to make a sound or a sudden movement that might attract attention.

As Jason was edging towards the balcony, Nikole was talking to Luggar. 'Let him go,' she said. 'Throw down the gun or I'll slit the old bag's throat.'

Luggar did not move.

'You know I'll do it,' Nikole hissed. 'You think I care for the life of that lout? Do you? Ask yourself who has the upper hand here, who has the cards to play. The valuable assets.'

Jason paused to watch. He was almost at the doors now. Another step and they would detect his proximity and open. They would let him out into the freedom of the night. But he watched and waited.

Mrs Winther had said she did not have Dorpfeld's Prism. There did not seem to be any reason for her to lie about it. After all, that was a large part of what had got her into this mess with Nikole. And it was not lost on Jason that another large part was because she had ordered Luggar to set him free. And, while she had been responsible for chaining him up in the first place, that was because she didn't trust his

plan and because he had previously held a knife at her throat.

Like Nikole.

It was a dilemma. A moral, ethical, humanitarian dilemma. He could leave, safe and sound. Or he could try to help the woman who had at last shown him a more human and enlightened side of herself. But, if he did that, then in all probability they would both end up dead. He had to make his choice and live with it. Or die with it.

As Jason hesitated, Luggar slowly lifted his gun, made it safe, and hurled it across the room. For a moment, as it flew towards him, Jason thought that Luggar had thrown the gun to him. But it was propelled with far too much force to be caught easily, and was not aimed quite at Jason. It was aimed at the glass door.

Obligingly, as the gun approached, curling through the air, the door slid open. The sound of the water crashing down outside was suddenly very loud. The gun spun out into the night beyond. Jason caught a glimpse of it as it carried over the edge of the balcony and fell in a long, low, lazy arc towards the raging rapids below.

'Now let her go,' Luggar growled at Nikole as Powlo slowly pulled himself up.

But the young woman was shaking her head. 'No chance,' she said. 'She's had her day. It's time for a new administration. Tune the Cartel got back on track.' She grabbed the old woman's grey-blue hair with her free hand, dragging her head back and stretching the neck for the knife.

'Oh bugger!' Jason thought as he hurled himself across the room.

His shoulder caught Nikole in the side, sending her sprawling. The knife flew from her hand and clattered to the floor, spinning under the table.

In the same moment, Powlo turned to see what was happening. His eyes widened with surprise and anger.

Just as Luggar decked him.

Jason was picking himself up at the same moment as Nikole was getting to her feet. The woman's eyes were

murderous, her face dark as she lunged at Jason with her long fingers extended like talons. He grabbed her wrists and they grappled.

Powlo meanwhile had wrapped his legs round Luggar's as he fell to the older man's punch, dragging him down with him.

Mrs Winther was sitting watching calmly. As Luggar again smacked Powlo in the face, this time from a kneeling position, she gave a little squeak of appreciation and clapped her hands together. She rose to her feet to get a better view.

Jason managed to hurl Nikole away from him. He watched with satisfaction as she crashed into the side of the table and curled up in pain. He turned back towards the window, ready to run.

To find Mrs Winther standing in front of him. She was swaying precariously on her feet, one arm out in front of her in an unmistakably threatening gesture.

'So much for doing the right thing,' Jason murmured, and ran at her.

They met in a collision of arms and stomach. Both of them crashed to the floor. Jason struggled to escape the stomach and pull himself up, but he found that his right hand was held firmly in Mrs Winther's.

'Young man,' she began in an accusing tone.

'Sorry,' Jason insisted, 'got to dash.' He managed to drag his hand free and stand up. As he moved, his other hand became tangled in the woman's jacket and pulled it from under her.

'You were trying to leave without saying goodbye. I just wanted to say thank you,' Mrs Winther was saying. 'You've been such a great help and inspiration to us all.'

Jason paused, mouth open. Somewhere off to the side, Powlo had his arm round Luggar's neck and was forcing the older man to the ground. Powlo's own nose was bloody and flat. Nikole was staggering forward from the table, holding her side and limping. And something dropped from Mrs Winther's jacket pocket as Jason pulled his arm free.

Everyone froze. Everyone looked down at the floor. Jason looked back up at Mrs Winther. Her pupils were shrinking to tiny black dots and the wrinkles on her face were setting like concrete.

On the floor between them was Dorpfeld's Prism.

'Well, that explains a lot,' Jason said cheerily. And kicked it past her and across the room.

The crystal and its attached chain spun across the floor towards the balcony. The sliding glass door opened as it approached, and it came to a stop on the threshold. The door remained open, aware that there was an obstruction.

As soon as he kicked it, Jason realized his mistake. He should have sent it flying the other way. Now everyone was running the same way as he was. Mrs Winther was hurrying after the Prism, just ahead of Jason. Nikole was charging after her, or perhaps after Jason. Powlo was rushing to help Nikole, and Luggar was crawling painfully to help his mistress.

She was surprisingly fast for her size, and Jason could hear Mrs Winther muttering to herself as he struggled to pass her.

'I was happy,' she was murmuring between stentorian gasps. 'I want to be happy. So happy. I deserve it now. Really I do.'

Jason made no comment as he overtook her and raced for the door.

'No!' the old woman screamed after him, and Jason realized she thought he was after the Prism. Well, let her. He didn't care. He was out of here. Fast.

When his legs left the ground it took him a full second to work out what had happened. Incredibly, the enormous old woman had dived full length across the floor in an effort to reach Dorpfeld's Prism before Jason did. She had collided with his legs and sent him flying too.

He landed on her back, in time to see her hand reach out and grab the relic as they went sailing past. At once she was transformed from an angry old woman into a barrel of laughter guffawing loudly into the night air. Her huge bulk

made for tremendous inertia and momentum and once in motion she was not easily stopped.

Initially, this was of some amusement to Jason as he was carried out on to the balcony as if riding the back of a laughing whale. But then, as the stone balustrades at the edge of the balcony loomed closer, the full and terrible implication of his predicament hit him.

Just as Mrs Winther hit the balustrade.

The stone crumbled and broke under the pressure. The uprights were pushed away from the edge, out over the waterfall. The lintel toppled over the brink and disappeared. Mrs Winther came to rest right on the edge of the balcony, where the balustrade had been. She was holding Dorpfeld's Prism aloft and laughing like a hyena the size of a hippo.

For a moment Jason swayed on top of her. Everyone else was grouped in the doorway staring out at them. Below, Jason could hear the water smashing against the rocks. He could see the foaming rapids and the plunge pool where the waterfall entered at such force it turned the water white. Away in the distance, dawn was breaking. The sun was lipping over the horizon and it was going to be a beautiful day.

It was a shock to realize that all these thoughts and impressions had taken place in a single instant. What triggered the realization was that they were swaying. Mrs Winther's grotesque bulk was teetering on the edge of the balcony, rocking gently back and forth in an increasingly alarming manner, in time to her seemingly uncontrollable laughter.

One last time the two of them rolled slightly. Then the roll became a full loss of balance, and together they plunged over the edge and down towards the jagged waiting rocks below. Jason let out a scream of anger, surprise and fright as the balcony disappeared above him.

Mrs Winther was below him, rolling, tumbling. Dorpfeld's Prism was still held tightly in her hand as she turned end over end. Not screaming but laughing.

CHAPTER 14

It really was a hell of a long way down. Jason was not at all sure he wouldn't have preferred to have got it over with quickly, rather than hanging around waiting for the rocks to jump up and get him. Eventually. It did not help that there was a fat old lady just below him who seemed to be enjoying the experience no end. Her laughter was all around him, and as he watched he saw her press Dorpfeld's Prism to her lips.

'Oh gross,' he muttered, his words whipped away by the wind. He looked away.

Then suddenly the laughter was cut off. And a moment later it was replaced by a scream of sheer terror the like of which Jason had never heard before in his life. He twisted round to see what was happening. Had she dropped it? He could but hope.

But before he could see what was happening he felt himself caught in strong arms, his progress through the air slowed and stopped. A large moustache was tickling his ear and he struggled to avoid it. Somehow the discomfort was worse than the thought of impending death. Incongruously, the angel was still fully clothed, his wings erupting through the area usually covered by his rucksack.

As Clarence lifted Jason away, the screaming receded into the distance. They both peered down into the foaming water. They both winced as a large flabby body crashed into it and was swept on to the rocks. Then Clarence was flapping his magnificent wings and they were off towards the city, the rising sun behind them.

'Thanks for that,' Jason gasped. 'You're a lifesaver,' and now he laughed. It was laughter of relief more than good humour. 'What happened to Dorpfeld's Prism?' he asked when he had recovered a little. 'Did you see?'

‘It’s in my pocket,’ Clarence said. ‘I didn’t think it was very fair that she should be oblivious to what was happening.’

‘Not fair?’

‘It somehow did not seem appropriate.’

‘Don’t you...?’ Jason asked. ‘I mean, doesn’t it...? You know?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Clarence said. ‘I haven’t noticed. I assume it has no effect on my biomechanical brain.’

‘Hmm. Good thing, too, from what I’ve seen. Well, it’s lucky you were here,’ Jason added. He couldn’t think of anything much else to say under the circumstances. Thanks.’

‘You may not be so pleased when I tell you why I came,’ Clarence confessed.

Jason twisted to try to see the angel’s face. ‘Why?’ he demanded. ‘What’s happened?’

Clarence quickly explained.

‘What?’ Jason bellowed. ‘He actually said that? And she...’ He grunted in disbelief and annoyance, shaking his head.

‘I’m afraid so. And then...’

‘What? There’s more?’

‘Yes. Then he asked her if she wanted to come back to his room, I mean his *room*, not their little lobby, but his *room* room.’

‘Oh, no.’ Jason sighed. ‘Well, maybe it’s not what we think.’

Clarence sighed too. ‘Maybe not. He said something about coffee.’

‘Coffee?’ Jason exploded, twisted so violently that he almost slipped from Clarence’s grasp. ‘Can’t you fly any faster?’ he urged. ‘Forget Dorp-thing’s whatsit and cartels of hardened criminals and murderers,’ he said. ‘This is serious.’

The pub was thinning out now that it was early morning. Benny could hardly believe that she had been up all night. Where had the time gone? That was what happened when you sat and chatted and drank in good company.

She yawned massively, ending it with a smile. ‘Sorry, I’m whacked.’

‘Me too,’ Dent agreed. ‘I just want to curl up in bed and -’

‘Quite,’ Benny said. ‘Come on.’

She linked her arm through his and together they walked out of the pub area and back into the hotel proper. It was pleasant, feeling the warmth of Dent’s body close to her own. Benny hugged his arm closer as they walked. She was tired and muzzy and happy. Maybe this whole vacation wasn’t going to be such a boring waste of time after all.

They paused at the point where the bottom of the escalator had used to be. The top section now jutted out from the mezzanine into space, ending abruptly - ragged and broken-toothed.

‘Mice?’ Benny suggested.

Dent laughed, as if he knew what had really happened and thought Benny did too. He offered no explanation of his own. ‘We’ll take the lift,’ he said.

There were three lifts, all grouped together in a corner of the foyer. One of them had an ‘out of order’ notice on it. It was a simple piece of hotel notepaper stuck on with sticky tape. The writing was in chunky black marker pen, a hasty scrawl. More sticky tape was over the call button for that lift, just to make the point.

Dent pushed the button on one of the other lifts. Benny called the third. ‘Race you,’ she said.

They chatted about nothing much for a minute while they waited. The wine, the pub, where the evening and night had gone to. How surprised Mrs Winther would be to find Dorfheld’s Prism in her pocket.

The conversation died away. They shuffled their feet. Dent pushed each of the lift buttons again. Several times.

After five minutes there were several people grouped round the lifts. And still no lift.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Benny said. ‘What’s going on?’

‘I’ll go and find someone,’ Dent said.

But Benny grabbed his arm. ‘Don’t bother. It’ll take forever to get sorted out. Let’s use the stairs.’

Dent blinked. ‘We’re on the seventeenth floor,’ he pointed out.

Benny raised an eyebrow. 'Not up for it?' she asked innocently.

'The stairs,' Dent said. 'Good plan.'

Leaning over the rails of the mezzanine, Clarence could see Benny and Dent walking away from the lifts. He ran across to the lift area on the mezzanine where Jason was waiting. Two of the lifts were standing with doors open, unoccupied. The reason their doors were open was because they were jammed apart with chairs from the coffee area. The third lift was working, but Jason had stuck tape over the ground-floor button and a notice saying 'For ground floor, travel to Mezzanine and use stairs.' It seemed to work.

'They're going for the stairs,' Clarence said.

Jason nodded. 'Figures. Come on, we've got to stop them getting to their room.' He paused to pull the chairs from the lift entrances, and the door closed almost immediately.

But by then Jason and Clarence were both racing for the emergency stairs on the other side of the hotel.

Dent pushed the door. It was heavier than he had expected. So he pushed harder. But still the door refused to budge. He frowned. It was a fire door, it couldn't be locked.

'I think it's stuck,' he said to Benny.

'Let me try,' she said. 'You know, the female touch.'

He shrugged and let her put her shoulder to the door. Nothing. They both put their shoulders to the door and pushed.

'I thought it gave a little then,' Benny said breathlessly. 'It was like it started to open.'

'Maybe,' Dent conceded. 'Let's try again. Ready?'

But Benny was standing back from the door. 'This is silly,' she said. 'I'm too tired for this. I think maybe I'll find a sofa down here somewhere and just crash out.'

On the other side of the door, Jason relaxed slightly and gave Clarence a thumbs-up. They were both braced against the

door, using the bottom stair to push back against the door and keep it shut.

‘Don’t give up so easily,’ Dent’s voice filtered through the door.

‘Give up, give up,’ Jason hissed.

Clarence nodded urgently. His moustache wobbled up and down in sympathy.

Then Benny’s voice came from even further away. ‘Hey, look. I think the lifts are working again.’

Jason and Clarence looked at each other.

‘Oh, bugger!’ Jason exploded. ‘Come on. We’ve got to get up there before they do.’

They started up the stairs two at a time. Jason was breathless by the third floor.

‘Only fourteen more floors to go,’ Clarence reassured him. ‘Hurry up.’

There was a line of people queuing to get into the lifts now that they were working again. Benny and Dent waited their turn, which seemed to take forever. Each time the lift doors closed, it seemed longer and longer before they opened again.

One of the staff from the hotel reception desk arrived to apologize and mumble something about doors jammed open on the mezzanine and not understanding how this could happen and very sorry.

Eventually Benny and Dent squeezed into one of the lifts together with what seemed like half the rest of the guests in the entire hotel. At least one of whom Benny hoped was heading back to their room for a much-needed shower.

They arrived at the seventeenth floor eventually, after apparently stopping at about every floor on the way. Benny sprang from the lift, Dent close behind. They let out a collective sigh of relief and drew deep breaths of somewhat fresher air. Arm in arm once more, they made their tired way along the corridor towards their room.

It wasn’t there.

They both turned at the same point, to face the same door:
1726.

Dent was actually holding the key card, ready to swipe it through the reader when Benny stayed his hand. 'We're in 1725,' she said.

Dent paused. 'Must be more tired than I thought.'

They moved to the next door. It was 1727.

'Hang on.' Benny walked back and read out the room numbers. 'It goes 1723, 1726, 1727, and then 1729.'

Dent walked back and checked. 'That's odd. So where's...?' He looked round. 'Ah, here we are.'

Benny frowned. 'I was sure we were on this side of the corridor. I could have sworn...'

'It's the odd numbering that catches you out I expect.' Dent was running the card back and forth through the reader without effect. 'That and being tired. You see, on this side it goes 1724, 1725, 1728. Weird.' He held the card up to frown at it. 'Try yours,' he suggested to Benny. 'Mine's not doing it.'

She tried her card. Still with no result.

Dent sighed. 'Back to the foyer and get help,' he said without enthusiasm. 'Unless there's a comm round here.' They couldn't see one.

But as they were looking the door to their room suddenly opened. Out stepped a short, bald man. He glared at Benny, who was standing in front of his door. 'Can I help you?'

'Er, well yes. You're in my room actually.' She made to push past.

'I don't think so, young lady,' the man protested.

'One seven two five.' Benny pointed to the number.

'No,' the man said without looking. 'This is 1726. And it's my room.' He stepped fully into the corridor and slammed the door shut behind him. 'Good day,' he said curtly, and set off towards the lifts.

Neither Benny nor Dent said anything. They were more interested in the room number. It had dropped from the door when the man slammed it shut. Benny picked it up, examined it and handed it to Dent.

Without a word, she went to the next door along. The number on it was 1724. She pushed at the number with her finger. It was steady and firm.

Then Benny crossed to the room marked 1726. She tentatively pushed at the number on the door. It moved away as she pushed, swinging back like a pendulum when she moved her finger. She watched it for a moment, then lifted it from the door and tossed it away. Then she settled the 1725 number on to the tiny nail projecting from the woodwork and stood back to examine her work.

‘Who’, Benny said with feeling, ‘would do a dumb thing like that?’

Just around a corner in the same corridor, Jason was talking urgently into a house comm. Beside him Clarence was making ‘hurry-up’ gestures.

‘Yes, really. Urgent,’ Jason was saying. His voice rose an octave. ‘Yes it is, madam. I have a cold. Urgent. Yes.’ He listened for a moment, then said, ‘Thank you,’ and put down the phone.

‘Let’s hope they’re quick,’ he told Clarence as they crept to the corner of the corridor and peered round.

Further down the corridor, Dent Harper was just opening the door to room 1725.

‘Didn’t take them long to work that out,’ Clarence whispered.

At that moment there was a bong from the address system.

‘Yeah!’ Jason whispered loudly. ‘Let’s hope this does it for us.’

Dent paused as the door clicked open. They were both surprised by the bong of the hotel address system.

‘Probably about the lifts,’ Dent began to say.

He was cut off by the loud, feminine voice. It echoed slightly in the corridor.

‘This is an urgent message for Mr Dent Harper,’ the voice said.

‘What?’ said both Dent and Benny together. Then: ‘Shh.’

‘I repeat,’ the voice said, ‘an urgent message for Dent Harper. Would Dent Harper please call Tabitha urgently on 555767.1 repeat

‘Don’t bother,’ Benny shouted at the hidden speaker. She pushed Dent roughly through the door into the lounge area between their two bedrooms. Surprised, he tumbled forwards and fell into the small sofa. Benny was leaning over him in an instant, pressing him back down.

‘OK,’ she said with more urgency than the announcer had shown, ‘who’s Tabitha?’

Jason clapped Clarence on the back as they watched Benny push Dent into the room. Then he danced a short jig round the angel, laughing.

‘Yes, yes, yes!’ he proclaimed. ‘Are we brilliant or what?’

‘What?’ Clarence said.

‘Brilliant,’ Jason said again.

‘So what happens now?’ Clarence asked.

Jason stopped dancing. ‘Well, right now if I know Benny, which I do, she’s demanding to ring that number and find out who Tabitha is. And Harper is denying he knows anyone called Tabitha, or saying she’s his mother, or some crap.’

‘So she rings the number,’ Clarence said. ‘And nobody answers.’

‘Oh no. Tabitha answers.’

‘Where does the number ring?’ Clarence asked. ‘And who is Tabitha?’

Jason pointed to the house comm on the low table in the alcove beside them. ‘That’s the number,’ he said. ‘And I’m Tabitha.’ His voice became husky and breathless as it rose in pitch. ‘Hi, fly boy,’ he said. ‘Will you excuse me, handsome, but I’m expecting a call right about now from a Professor Summerfield.’

They both stared at the phone.

Nothing happened.

‘No really,’ Dent insisted, ‘I don’t. Nobody. At all.’ He managed to struggle into a sitting position. ‘Honestly.’

Benny looked at him. It was the sort of look that one went out of one’s way to avoid usually. Dent gulped.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘why don’t you call the number? See who it is? I mean, it’s probably some fan who found out I was staying here or something.’

Benny nodded. ‘Good story,’ she said. ‘That the best you can do?’

‘Call, then,’ Dent insisted. ‘If I wanted to make something up, I’d say it was my mother or some crap like that. Believe me, I don’t know this person.’

‘No, no,’ she said lightly. ‘I believe you. You call.’

‘I’m not calling,’ Dent said. ‘Why should I?’

Benny was at once annoyed again. ‘Oh, so now you’re trying to wriggle out of it, are you? Trying to pretend this person doesn’t exist? Well that won’t wash with me, you know.’

Dent held up his hand. ‘Fine. Fine, I’ll call.’

‘Oh great,’ Benny said. She flopped down in a chair. ‘Don’t mind me, will you? Just call up this floozy whoever she is and have a smooch on the phone, why don’t you?’ She got up again. ‘I’ll be in my room. Good night. .. Morning.’ She waved her hand in annoyance. ‘Whatever.’

‘Benny!’ Dent called after her, exasperated. ‘Do you want me to make the call or not? Or do you want to do it? I don’t care, really I don’t. Whatever you like.’

Benny paused at her door. ‘You don’t know Tabitha?’

‘Never heard of her.’

‘And that’s the honest truth?’

‘It’s the truth.’

Benny tapped her fingers on the door frame. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘Call and see who it is. I suppose it might, just might, be important.’

Clarence was shaking his head. ‘They’re having coffee,’ he said anxiously. ‘I just know they’re having coffee. I hope they’re not having coffee.’

‘I hope they are having coffee,’ Jason said. ‘I mean really having coffee rather than...’ His voice tailed off.

The comm chirped. The sudden loud noise made them both jump. They both looked at it. It continued to chirp.

'You want to get it?' Jason asked.

Clarence shook his head with moustache-trembling speed and violence.

'Thought not.' Jason lifted the handset. He cleared his throat, and affected a throaty, hoarse falsetto. 'Well, hello there, this is Tabitha here, darling mine. And why aren't you here with me right now?' He put his hand over the handset and nodded to Clarence. 'It's her,' he mouthed.

Then he dropped the handset. He scrabbled to pick it up, and hastily broke the connection.

'Some guy,' he explained to Clarence. 'He was quite rude, actually.'

'Harper,' Clarence said.

Jason thought about this. 'Yes,' he decided. 'Bastard.'

Benny walked back towards Dent. 'I'm impressed,' she said. 'If you did know her, you won't hear from her again after language like that.'

'Learnt some new words, did you?' Dent opened his door, waiting just far enough outside his room for Benny to take it as an invitation. If she wanted.

'A few,' she said. 'You've got quite a mouth on you, haven't you?'

'Come and find out,' Dent offered.

She hesitated barely a moment. Together they were inside his room in seconds. He fell back on to the bed, Benny on top of him. Slowly, almost cautiously, their mouths met.

Just as the comm beside the bed beeped.

Benny froze in position. Her eyes had suddenly lost their sheen.

'Now that,' Dent said, 'that could be my mother.'

She beat him to the comm by the smallest margin, and pulled the handset to her ear. Almost at once she shoved it across to him. 'It's a woman,' she said. 'But I don't think it's your mother.'

Dent put the handset carefully to his ear. 'Yes?' his voice was shaking slightly. A few seconds later, more confidently now, he said, 'Well, thank you. Thank you very much. No,

you wouldn't, she's here with me. We were...' He glanced at where Benny was kneeling on the bed, her arms folded, but her expression now more curious than angry. 'We were just having a conference.' He held out the receiver.

Benny took the receiver from Dent and put it to her ear. 'This is Professor Summerfield,' she said cautiously.

He had left everything to her. It had never occurred to her that he had no family. But she had never heard him mention brothers, sisters, parents or, now she considered it, lovers. When she found out, she had wept.

Then she had pulled herself together and gone down to the shop and the office to go through the books. The books of her business. Such as it was.

In fact it was in pretty good shape, she found. Her duties as an employee had not extended to any of the accountancy. She was front-of-house, working with the clients, looking pretty - for them and, she realized now, for Jericko Klench.

The last few days had been decidedly odd. But, despite the death of her employer and her change in status, Linn Sekka still remembered the odd way she had felt when he had given her Dorpfeld's Prism. And, try as she might, she was unable to escape from the fact that she had been happy, indescribably happy. And that had been good.

She did not seem to be able to recapture the same extreme of emotion and feeling, but she was finding that a positive attitude to life, an optimistic outlook, and even just being friendly and polite to people went some small way towards achieving the same result.

So it was out of altruism as well as a sense of guilt that she had called Professor Summerfield at the Xcelsior. It was probably too late, but Linn felt she should check that the woman was all right. After all, she had herself sent Mrs Winther's thugs after the woman.

When there was no answer, she tried Dent Harper's room. The call was answered almost at once, and she spoke briefly to Harper.

When she heard Professor Summerfield's voice, Linn felt a wave of relief and good will. 'Professor,' she enthused, 'how splendid of you to speak with me. I just wanted to make sure that everything was OK after, well, after – you know.' She lowered her voice reverently as she almost spoke of the dead.

'Yes, everything's fine.' Professor Summerfield's voice sounded a little bemused. Bemused and tired. 'Thank you. No problems at all. And you?'

'Oh, you know,' Linn said. 'Muddling through.' How kind of her to ask. 'Sorry to interrupt your conference.'

'More of a congress actually. With a bit of luck.' There was a pause, then: 'Er, was that it?'

'Oh, yes. That was it,' Linn confessed. 'Thank you so much.' And she broke the connection.

Benny shook her head and replaced the handset. 'Now,' she said as she rolled over on to her back, 'if there are no more interruptions...'

'None.' Dent climbed on to the bed beside her. 'I promise.'

They reached out for each other.

The hammering at the door was so loud and sudden that they sprang apart instantly in surprise. Each looked at the other with a mixture of horror and indignation.

'Now what?' Benny said. She stifled a yawn.

Dent was buttoning up his shirt as a muffled voice called, 'Room service!' As soon as he opened the door to the lounge area, a trolley pushed him back into the room.

'Here we are, sir, madam. Breakfast!' The man pushing the trolley was short and thin with a tidy beard and short red hair. He manoeuvred the trolley to a space at the end of the bed. It was laden down with plates and covered dishes. The man stood behind the trolley, apparently prepared to explain at great length the contents of each dish.

But before he could start Dent stuffed a few ten-dinari notes into his top pocket and bundled him out of the door. He closed the door with relief and stood leaning back against it for several moments, breathing deeply. 'Did you order breakfast?' he asked calmly after a while.

Benny was still lying on the bed, face down, looking at him. She yawned. 'No,' she said indistinctly round the yawn. 'You?'

'Definitely not.' He crossed to the trolley. 'Smells good, though,' he admitted. 'You hungry?'

'Not as hungry as I was,' Benny told him pointedly. She yawned again. 'All right, what have we got?'

Dent busied himself lifting lids and sniffing at the contents. He described each dish as he went. 'Visarian bacon, scrambled jolyon eggs, devils on alpacaban backs. Something that looks like muesli, we'll give that a miss. And...' He lifted the final lid with a flourish. 'Prunes!' He frowned. 'Lots of prunes.'

He looked across to where Benny was lying. She had rolled on to her back and was looking up at the ceiling. At least, he realized, she would have been if her eyes were open. As he approached, she snored loudly.

Outside the hotel, an angel flew, silent and majestic, into the morning sky. Few people witnessed the event. Most were more concerned with the life going on at ground level. And the awnings and covers of the market stalls clustered round the Xcelsior blocked much of the view of the sky above.

The angel was holding a man in its arms, firmly but not close. Together the two of them rose to the seventeenth floor of the hotel.

'Let's hope they eat so much of the breakfast they don't feel up to doing anything much physical afterwards,' Jason said. He tried not to look down.

Clarence slowed as they approached the window. 'The curtains are open,' he said. 'I suppose that's a good sign.'

'Unless they were just too involved to realize or care.' Jason closed his eyes. 'I'm not sure I want to look. Tell me what you see, will you?'

There was silence for a long while, then Clarence said quietly, 'I think it's OK.'

Jason opened his eyes and looked into the room. 'I think we probably have cause for a small celebration,' he said.

Inside the room, Benny was lying on the bed. She was asleep. And she was fully clothed. Dent Harper, also fully clothed, was flopped down on the bed beside her. He was facing away from them, but everything about his position, about the way he was breathing deeply and rhythmically, suggested that he too was asleep.

Jason held his hand across his chest, palm open. 'Put it there,' he said happily. Then almost immediately, and with some urgency, 'Whoah, no, put it back, you're dropping me!'

'Sorry,' said Clarence as he held Jason. 'We did good here, didn't we?'

'Oh yes,' Jason agreed. 'We did excellent.'

At first she was disorientated. It was as if she were in her room, yet not in her room. It took a few seconds before she realized why this was. Everything was reversed. She was in a mirror image of her room. Another second and she realized why this was - she was in Dent's room. Lying on his bed.

She sat up immediately. From beside her came a grunt of sound. Dent Harper was lying beside her, fast asleep. He had a calm, almost serene expression on his face. His mouth was slightly open and he was snoring gently.

Typical, Benny decided. She got carefully up from the bed so as not to wake him. Typical. She had been prepared to give her all, to allow herself to be smothered in a few hours of innocent passion. And he had fallen asleep on her as she lay waiting. What kind of person did he think she was to be played with like this? What sort of person was he, if he could fall asleep in preference to spending time with her? What sort of value proposition was that? What sort of basis for a relationship?

Typical.

She tiptoed across the room, let herself out as quietly as she could, and then slammed the door shut behind her.

Dent woke with a start. A loud noise from somewhere had startled him and woken him from a dream about people wandering about being nice to each other. He lay staring at the ceiling for a while. Then he remembered Benny.

He smiled and rolled over towards her.

She wasn't there. He stared at the place where she wasn't. Then he leapt up and lifted the covers of the bed. Finally he checked under the pillow. Nothing.

Typical, he thought. You rest your eyes for a few moments and she ups and leaves without a word. Well, if that was all he meant to her, then who cared? He flopped back on to the bed and closed his eyes again.

She was packing when Dent finally knocked on her door. She let him in, making no effort to disguise what she was doing.

'You leaving us?' Dent asked. There was enough sadness in his voice for it to be polite.

'I think it's best, don't you?'

'Well,' Dent said, 'if you're not having fun, then stop doing it. That's what I always say.'

'Just because you say it, it doesn't make it true,' Benny said, rather more sharply than she had intended. 'Sorry,' she added. 'That was unfair. But this place hasn't really turned out to be what I expected.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, it's just so quiet. Nothing happens. Not really.'

'No,' Dent was shaking his head. 'I meant, what do you mean about "Just because you say it, it doesn't make it true"?''

'Oh that.' She closed her rucksack and tried to fasten it. It was too full and the straps did not reach. 'Nothing. Really.'

'If it was nothing, then why say it?' Dent persisted. He was getting annoyed, she could tell. 'You must have meant something by it.'

'All right.' She gave up on the straps. 'Look, maybe I was naive, but I thought that stuff you wrote in your books was true. That's all.'

It took him a moment to control himself before he answered levelly, 'Are you saying I lie?'

'Well, no.' She closed her tired eyes for a moment and rubbed them. 'But you have to admit, life out here just isn't

like that. OK, so some exaggeration is good for sales, good for the image -'

'Exaggeration?' he exploded. 'Exaggeration? Look, I can't help it if you're the sort of person nothing interesting ever happens to, can I?' He was advancing on her now, his eyes ablaze. 'I can't help it if you're so boring that life just sort of passes you by. You want excitement? Well, you won't get it swanning through life thinking everything's just cosy and rosy and waiting for an adventure.' He stopped, his nose close to hers. 'I doubt you'd know an adventure if you fell over one. That swamp was probably a traffic island in the Sangellides.' He stood bristling in front of her, his fists clenched at his sides. His voice was quieter, sadder, as he added, 'I mean, any woman who can fall asleep in the middle of a passionate encounter must have serious problems relating to any sort of real life.'

'Fall asleep?' Benny shouted back. 'Me fall asleep? What about you, Mr Adventurer? What's the problem there? Doesn't the macho, ready-for-anything image extend as far as the bedroom, then?'

'You fell asleep, not me,' Dent insisted. He turned and walked back to the door.

'Oh, right,' Benny shouted after him. 'So you usually snore at women during romantic interludes do you? I bet that really gets Tabitha going.'

He turned back to face her. 'I told you about Tabitha,' he said more quietly, more upset.

'Yeah.' Benny was also upset, but determined not to show it 'Yeah, and I believed that too.' She turned away, pretending to be doing up her rucksack. But in fact she could not see the straps through the moisture in her eyes. 'Stupid things,' she said, but it sounded more like a sob.

After a moment she dropped the straps in frustration. She felt Dent's hand on her shoulders as he held her from behind.

'I'm sorry, Benny,' he said gently.

'I'm sorry, too,' she mumbled. She did not turn to face him.

‘I think...’ He paused as if he really was thinking. ‘I think we’re maybe just not compatible,’ he said. ‘One of us is by nature an adventurer, has to be out there doing things, making discoveries, leading an exciting life. The other one just needs to dream about it.’

‘You’re right,’ Benny admitted with a sigh. ‘And we can’t even agree on which of us is which.’ She did turn towards him now.

Dent stepped back a pace and lowered his arms. ‘Friends?’ he said quietly.

She nodded. ‘Come to the spaceport and see me off, will you?’

They were all there. The heads of each of the various groups and business concerns. There were no spaces at the long, coffin-shaped table. Despite the number of people, the room was quiet, the atmosphere subdued.

When there was absolute silence, Nikole rose to her feet. She stood at the head of the table and fixed each of them in turn with her eyes. Behind her Luggar and Powlo stood like twin sentries as she spoke.

‘It is a loss we all feel keenly,’ Nikole said. ‘Mrs Winther was an incredible inspiration to us all. She led us by her example. And to lose her to such a tragic accident...’ She paused to shake her head and bite her lip. She looked down at the table for a few studied moments before continuing. ‘We will miss her. I shall miss her. She was...’ Nikole stared off into space, as if seeing into the past, but in fact focusing on the swords fixed to the far wall. ‘She was like a mother to me,’ Nikole said. Behind her, she knew, Luggar would be nodding in sympathetic agreement.

Luggar listened to Nikole’s speech with satisfaction. She was making all the right points, hitting all the right buttons. Mrs Winther had chosen her successor well. She had been concerned, he knew, that her protégé lacked the killer instinct. But Luggar knew that those fears could be laid to rest with Rula Winther herself.

The Cartel was in safe hands once more.

Dent Harper whistled happily as he took a taxi back from the spaceport. They had passed three wrecks so far. One of them looked like a genuine accident, one was a shooting, one was probably down to highway rage. He had counted seven bodies in all.

The taxi swerved into the side of the road to allow an enforcement vehicle to scream past. Somewhere ahead of them was the sound of gunfire, and a pall of oily smoke was rising above the freeway to the ferry. Several alarms were sounding from various premises in the shopping area along the side of the road.

Dent breathed a sigh of relief. Already life was beginning to return to normal. What was it with that woman?

CHAPTER 15

The clear crystal caught the light as it spun within its mounting. Clarence, now clean-shaven once more and returned to his normal haircut, held the silver chain and let it dangle in front of Jason and Braxiatel.

'Looks innocent enough,' Braxiatel admitted.

'We thought you'd like it for your collection,' Jason said. 'Seemed as good a home as any.'

'Better than most,' Clarence said. He lowered it gently on to Braxiatel's desk, letting the chain coil up beside the prism.

'Well done,' Cwej said. 'Great job.'

'Yes, congratulations to you both,' Braxiatel said.

'Let's wait and see if they're warranted, shall we?' Jason advised. 'It was quite a rush to get back ahead of Benny. Her shuttle could be here any time from -'

Behind him the door swung open. 'Hi, guys,' came Benny's cheery voice.

'- now,' Jason finished. He turned. 'Oh, hi, Benny. You're back soon. Good holiday?'

She dumped her rucksack on the marble floor and joined them by the desk. 'Oh, not bad. I could do with a drink, though.'

'Allow me.' Braxiatel headed for the drinks cabinet. 'We were just... um...' he said. 'Er, weren't we?'

'Yes,' Cwej agreed. 'Just now. We were.'

'Talking about the collection,' Jason said quickly. 'How much we were missing your help with cataloguing everything.'

'Really?' She looked at him slightly sideways. 'I wouldn't have thought that was your sort of thing really.'

'Oh yes,' Jason said.

'He's been helping a lot,' Clarence added.

'Invaluable, I'd say,' Cwej said.

'Taken to it like a duck to water,' Braxiatel confirmed. He handed Benny a glass of wine. 'Anyone else?'

'Wouldn't say no,' Jason said.

'Just a small one for me. This body can't take it so well as I used to,' Cwej confessed.

Clarence shook his head.

'No,' Jason went on, 'it's really very interesting. Exciting, actually. Wouldn't you say?'

'Tremendously,' Braxiatel agreed.

'Stimulating,' Cwej put in.

'Nothing to the sort of excitement I expect you've been having, though,' Jason told Benny. 'All that frontier-spirit stuff. Derring-do. That sort of thing.'

They all looked at her expectantly.

Benny sipped her wine.

Then she sat down on the large leather-upholstered sofa. 'Well,' she said slowly, drawing the word out, 'I have to say that it's not all it's cracked up to be.'

'Oh.' There was a collective murmur of sympathy and disappointment.

Benny held up her hand. 'I mean, it was OK. But nothing out of the ordinary. You know.'

'Well, that's often the case with these things,' Braxiatel said matter-of-factly. 'You get there and you find that there's some element of hyperbole. Or other people's ideas of a good and exciting time don't quite match your own.'

'Mmm,' Benny said. 'Tell me about it.' She stood up. 'Oh it was all right. I had a few laughs. Met some really interesting people. Really nice people, actually.'

Jason and Clarence exchanged worried looks.

'But,' Benny went on, 'I wouldn't rush back.' She wandered over to Braxiatel's desk and put down her empty glass. 'Thanks for the drink,' she said. Then she stopped, her hand still on the stem of the glass. 'Good gracious,' she said.

Everyone else in the room seemed to have frozen too. Braxiatel was the first to recover. He went quickly to his desk and pretended to realize for the first time what Benny was looking at.

‘Oh, that,’ he said. ‘Just a trinket. Should go back into the archive, really.’

Benny reached out and picked it up. She seemed not to notice the gasp from Jason as she held up Dorpfeld’s Prism and examined it carefully. ‘I saw something like this recently,’ she said. ‘Very like this in fact. How strange.’

‘Oh, they’re ten a penny,’ Braxiatel said lightly. ‘You find them all over the place. I think there’s some factory somewhere in the Darkling Zone that turns them out by the dozen.’

Jason and Clarence had joined them. ‘He’s right,’ Jason said. ‘I’ve seen one of those before too. How about you?’

‘Oh yes,’ Clarence said. ‘Me too.’

They all stood round as Benny continued to examine it.

‘Benny,’ said Jason after a while.

‘Yes?’

‘Do you, er... That is, do you feel any different?’ He shrugged. ‘I mean, after your holiday of course.’

Benny looked at him. She was smiling. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Not at all.’ She dropped Dorpfeld’s Prism back on to the blotter. ‘Why?’

‘Oh, you know. Just wondered. They say a change is as good as a rest, after all.’

‘No,’ Benny said again. ‘No change. And not much rest, actually. It was a rotten flight back.’

‘I know,’ Jason sighed. ‘Er, I know how you feel,’ he went on rapidly. ‘Had some bad flights myself. Not recently, of course. Because I’ve been here. All the time.’ He looked round at the others for help. He got none.

But Benny seemed not to be listening. She crossed the room and picked up her discarded rucksack. ‘I’m just glad to be back with my friends,’ she said as she hefted it over her shoulder. ‘To be back home.’

‘And we’re glad to have you with us,’ Cwej told her.

‘Thanks.’ She hesitated a moment in the doorway. Then, with a half-wave, she was gone.

‘Well, I think we survived that more or less intact,’ Braxiatel said after a pause. He smiled broadly. ‘Well done, team.’ He

nodded down at his desk. 'And thanks for the holiday gift. It's nice to meet it at last after reading so much about it.'

'No problem,' Jason said.

'You're welcome,' Clarence told him.

'You know,' Braxiatel said as he peered at the crystal lying innocuously on his desk, 'its name was a misunderstanding really. It destroyed Andreas Dorpfeld's life, as you know. Perverted his perception of reality and upset his whole value system. When he was on his deathbed, he asked his friend Myerson to destroy the thing. I guess Dorpfeld finally regained his purchase on reality.'

'But Myerson didn't destroy it,' Jason said. 'Obviously.'

'What was the misunderstanding?' Clarence asked.

'Myerson asked what it was. He thought Dorpfeld replied, "My prism."' Braxiatel reached out tentatively towards the relic. 'In fact, he said, "My prison."'

Jason leant forward and caught Braxiatel's hand. 'I wouldn't touch it,' he said. 'It could be the death of you.'

Braxiatel withdrew his hand slowly, almost reluctantly. 'Yes, perhaps Clarence had better do the honours.'

The angel lifted Dorpfeld's Prism, holding it up so they could all see it.

'I may regret this, but, if everyone misheard what he said,' Cwej asked quietly, 'how would you know that they misheard? And how do you know what he really said?'

Braxiatel shrugged. 'Who knows?' he replied. 'Perhaps I was there.' He smiled thinly. 'Or perhaps I'm making it up. I forget.'